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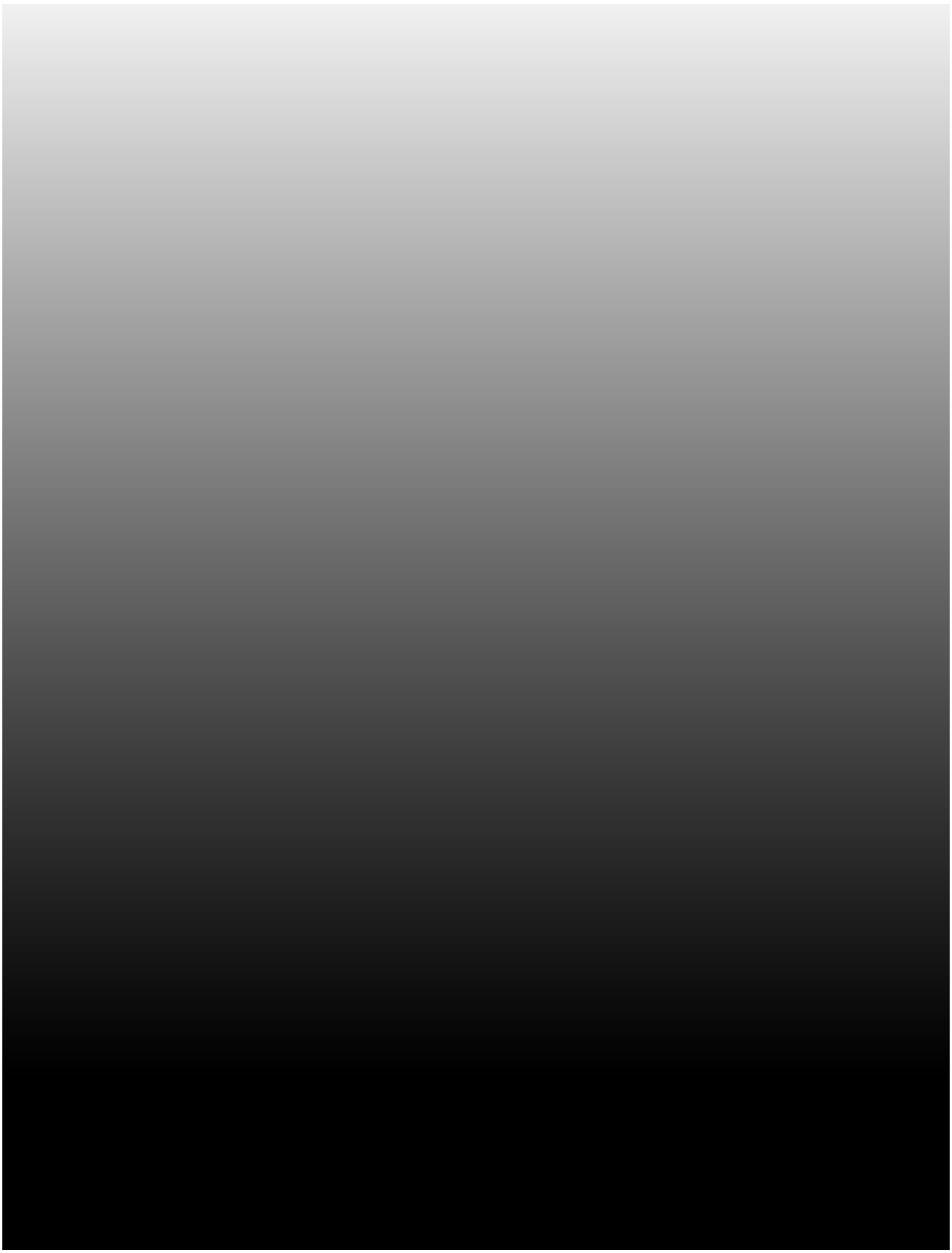
Daisuke Aizawa
Illustration by
Touzai
03
THE
Eminence
IN
Shadow

Table of Contents

Insert
Title Page
Copyright
Prologue Heading to the Lawless City over Fall Break!
Chapter 1 Lawless City Bandit Hunting!
Chapter 2 Storming the Crimson Tower!
Chapter 3 Pursuing the Blood Queen!
Auxiliary Chapter Field Notes on a Little Brother—by Young Claire!
Chapter 4 I'll Destroy It All and Start from Scratch!
Chapter 5 Printing Fake Money as Mitsugoshi Throws Down with the Major Corporate Alliance!
Chapter 6 Circulating Counterfeit Cash!
Epilogue The One to Destroy It All and Start from Scratch—with Fake Bills!
Appendix
Afterword
Yen Newsletter

“Took you long enough to notice…
That’s the legendary Red Moon…”



Anything sounds cool if you stick the word *legendary* in front of it.

Crimson
"The Red Moon... isn't ready yet..."
Mary
"The rampage is beginning..."
Juggernaut
"My instinct's always right."
Yukime
"Verily, I wish for us to get close."

“ ”
...
Elisabeth
Shadow
“I might just show you what I’m capable of...”
The Eminence in Shadow

Alpha
Delta
Beta
Gamma
Nu
“So he’s been looking at the bigger picture... Who knew anyone could see so far?”

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APPENDIX

The Eminence in Shadow

03

The Eminence in Shadow

03

Daisuke Aizawa

Illustration by
Touzai

YEN ON
New York

Copyright

The Eminence in Shadow 03
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Translation by Nathaniel Hiroshi Thrasher
Cover art by Touzai
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KAGE NO JITSURYOKUSHA NI NARITAKUTE ! Vol. 3
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Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Prologue Heading to the Lawless City over Fall Break!

Chapter 1 Lawless City Bandit Hunting!

Chapter 2 Storming the Crimson Tower!

Chapter 3 Pursuing the Blood Queen!

Auxiliary Chapter Field Notes on a Little Brother—by Young Claire!

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I wanted to be one of them.
Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

Heading to the Lawless City over Fall Break!

The Eminence in Shadow
Volume 3

Prologue

Prologue

Heading to the Lawless City over Fall Break!

My sister Claire ended up winning the Bushin Festival.

Rose showing up out of nowhere threw me for a bit of a loop, but thankfully, I was able to improvise a satisfying climax to my performance.

She nearly stole the show from me, but in a flash of brilliance, I was like, *Wait, can I pull this off?* and stole it right back from under her nose.

And I totally nailed it.

The world is ever changing, and we all have our own motivations as we walk through life. No performance goes exactly according to script. So I need to keep my mind pliable to handle any situation the universe throws at me with a little bit of improv.

Anyway, once the Bushin Festival ended, everything settled back into its ordinary routine.

I mean, apparently the Oriana Kingdom is kind of a hot mess right now, but I'm just your average aristocrat, so that doesn't affect me starting my second semester.

Still, word on the street is that Oriana Kingdom has split into the something-something faction and the other something-something faction and they're starting to go at it. Everyone's saying that civil war is probably gonna break out before the year is over. Man, if they really do start a civil war, I gotta get in on that action. That sounds like a blast.

As for school, little has changed despite Rose's absence.

I hate to say it, but that's the way things go.

Everyone around me has been saying all sorts of nasty things about her—that she acted in a fit of jealously or that there was some sort of succession dispute—but nobody actually knows what really went down. I'm on her side no matter what her reasons were, so I hope she's doing okay wherever she is.

Claire's schedule has supposedly been booked ever since her victory. Between all the speeches she's had to give and the parties requesting her attendance, she's like a bona fide celebrity. All that died down a bit when we headed into fall break, though, and she's back at the academy now.

I guess that's why they call it "fifteen minutes of fame."

Unfortunately, now that she's free, she's been breathing down my neck, and I've found myself reluctantly forced to throw her a celebratory dinner.

That brings us to the present, where she and I are in the middle of enjoying a meal at one of Mitsugoshi's restaurants.

I'm pretty sure I ordered the "Blessing for the Peasants" course—dirt cheap, a limited-time offer—but for some reason, they brought us this super-extravagant banquet. Weird.

"I had no idea you could pull something like this off. Not even the party they threw at the castle had food this nice…," Claire remarks upon seeing the feast.

We're also in some sort of private room for high-class VIPs.

I wondered if maybe they'd mistaken me for someone else, but I double-checked with our waitress on my way to the bathroom, and apparently there's been no error.

Just thinking about the bill makes me squirm.

Oh, wait, this place is part of the Mitsugoshi Group. Maybe they're giving me special treatment because I'm friends with Gamma.

"You know, I'm friends with Mitsugoshi's president," I tell my sister.

"Oh please."

"No, seriously. I'm pretty sure that's why they're giving us the VIP treatment."

"I wish your jokes had better punch lines. Don't worry, I get what's going on here. I can see how much work you must have gone through to put this together for me."

Claire smiles.

I haven't seen her look this pleased in a while. Better just let her believe what she wants.

"I love the food at Mitsugoshi's restaurants. It's all so unusual—and delicious. You know, this is the first time I've had roast beef."

"Huh."

The two of us continue making small talk as we enjoy our meal.

"Annerose lost, Princess Iris dropped out, and that Mundane Mann guy got disqualified. I guess I only won because I got lucky."

"Yeah, basically," I tell her.

"Take that back."

"I meant to say, No way! You won 'cause you're the best!"

"Of course I did. But that's not how society will see it."

"Eh, you can hardly blame them."

"Why don't you try that again?" she threatens.

"If the world can't see that you're the best, there must be something wrong with their eyes!"

"Well, that's just how things are. The masses are blind. But I'm not the kind of woman who'll just sit quietly as they look down on me."

"You'd probably be more likable if you were."

"I'm *this* close to blowing a fuse."

"Damn the masses! Go prove to them just how strong and pretty you really are!"

“That’s the plan, of course. And you’re going to help me.”

“Am not.”

“You have no say in the matter. It’s for your sake, too.”

“Wait, mine?”

“Yours. What do you think’s going to happen to you after you graduate? With your mediocre grades, you’ll have a hard time getting a decent job.”

“I mean…”

Now that she mentions it, I haven’t given the issue much thought. She’s going to be the head of our household, so I guess I’m gonna have to get a job of some sort.

Something flashy like joining the Knight Order is out of the question.

I need to be someone more forgettable… Aha!

“I’m gonna become Gatekeeper A.”

You know, an extra who tells the protagonist that he can’t pass until he pays the toll.

“Gatekeeper A? What’s ‘A’?”

“You know, like, ‘average’?”

“For the love of… Gatekeeping is hardly a job fit for an aristocrat. They work twelve-hour shifts and get barely any days off. Plus, the work is grueling, and the pay is dismal.”

“Oh. Darn…”

Not having any days off sounds miserable. For one, it’d get in the way of my shadowbroker activities.

“What about jailhouse guards?”

“That’s even worse. You have to interact with the dregs of society all day.”

“Maaaan… Well, I’ll just figure it out when the time comes. As long as I can do the stuff I want to, I’m fine working pretty much anywhere.”

“And what exactly is this ‘stuff’ you want to do?”

“It’s a secret. I have a policy of not talking about things that are really important to me.”

“So I’m gathering you have no goals. Stop making up excuses on the spot to postpone thinking about what you want to do with your life.”

“What makes you think that’s what I’m doing?”

“Oh, I think you can figure out why.”

“Well, whatever.”

“You’re not ‘whatever’-ing yourself out of this one. We’re talking about your future here. So clear your calendar for fall break. If you do as I say, I’ll be able to wedge you into the Knight Order.”

“Wait, what do you mean?”

Claire flashes me a fearless smile. “Heh-heh. We’re going off to hunt the Blood Queen, a Progenitor Vampire. Just stay behind me and you’ll be fine.”

After we finish our dinner, we walk through the darkened capital.

When I tried to pay for the meal, they told me it was on the house.

I guess Gamma really did give me a freebie. Well, Claire did just win the Bushin Festival, so maybe that was why. Could go either way.

“It’s passed the dorm curfew,” I note.

“I got you permission ahead of time. I told them you were attending a party.”

“Ooh, good going.”

The street is oddly quiet.

I glance up at the sky and catch a glimpse of the new moon shining overhead. It sort of seems…redder than usual.

“What’s wrong?” Claire asks.

“I feel like the moon has a red tinge to it.”

“Does it? Looks normal to me.”

“Maybe you’re right. Anyways, even if the moon turned red or blue or some other color, it wouldn’t really matter.”

It definitely looks cooler red, though.

“Oh, I guess I wasn’t finished telling you about the Blood Queen,” Claire remembers.

“Oh, right.”

“I assume you already know her followers have been recently venturing outside the Lawless City and causing no small amount of destruction.”

Bold of her to assume I already know about this.

“The affected countries have requested that the Dark Knights Guild hunt her down.”

“Makes sense.”

“In short, they put together a team of the finest dark knights. That said, many of them are egotistic assholes, so there’s no guarantee we’re actually going to be able to work together as a team.”

“Huh.”

“And that’s exactly why I’m bringing you along with me. Don’t worry, all you have to do is find somewhere safe to watch me while I do the work. Even that’ll be enough to let you put the mission on your résumé.”

“Ah.”

“Once we’ve padded up your job experiences, it’ll be easy to squeeze you into the Knight Order. I hit it off with the Imperial Guard’s commander at a party the other day, so if you want, I can get the ball rolling for you.”

“Let me think about it.”

“The mission’s going to take place over fall break. Some of the more eager ones will set out early, but there’s no need for us to rush.”

At that moment, I catch the smell of blood in the wind. It’s pretty thick. Did someone die or something?

My sister notices a moment later.

“I smell blood. And it’s coming from around here.”

She stops in her tracks, then peers into a dark alleyway.

“Stay behind me,” she orders.

“Got it.”

She reaches down to her waist, grips her sword, and walks on in. I follow her, leaving a little room between us.

As we get a little farther into the alley, we see a dark figure hunched over.

We can make out the *crunch, crunch, crunch* sounds of chewing.

Yup, someone’s dead, all right.

“Gh…!” Claire stifles her surprised scream and draws her sword.

The shadowy figure must have sensed her, because it turns.

It’s a person, drenched in blood.

No wait, not quite.

Its eyes are bloodred, and its slack jaw is lined with jagged fangs. Crimson drool drips from its mouth onto the pavement.

The half-eaten remains of a human corpse lie by its feet.

“Lower your weapon and surrender peacef—!”

“GRAAAAAAH!”

The thing bares its fangs and launches itself at my sister.

Its movements are closer to those of a beast than a person.

Claire’s blade glistens in the moonlight—then slices its stomach clean through.

“I warned you,” she growls to her bisected assailant.

But…

“Is it still alive…?!”

The thing’s torso is scuttling across the ground. It reaches out and grabs Claire by the leg.

“GRAAAAAH…”

“That’s enough!” My sister’s sword cleaves through its neck.

Its head rolls across the stone ground, its teeth snapping impotently against the air.

Then, after leveling a weak glare at Claire, it eventually goes silent.

The cloying stench of blood fills the alleyway.

“A ghoul… Could it be, one of the Blood Queen’s…?”

The creature had been shaped like a human, but its skin was pallid and bloodless, and its red eyes and sharp fangs caught my attention, as well.

Furthermore, its bestial movements hinted at an incredible degree of vitality.

However, it seemed to have completely lost its sense of reason.

“Ghouls are vampire minions, right?” I ask.

Honestly, I couldn’t care less about ghouls, but vampires sound like they might be strong.

Claire looks down and mutters, “Monsters…”

“Sis…?”

“Ghouls were originally humans, weren’t they…?”

“I think so, yeah.”

“I’ve been so scared these days, wondering if I’ll end up like them in the future. What if I become a monster, robbed of my reason…?”

“I’m pretty sure you don’t have much in the first pl—”

“—Quiet. Supposedly, Princess Rose was one of the ‘possessed’… It’s just a rumor, but still. I haven’t told anyone, but…I might be possessed, too…”

“Huh? You might be possessed?”

Does she mean that thing I healed, like, forever ago?

“A long time ago, I found some black bruises on my back. I couldn’t tell anyone because I was so scared, but they kept spreading and getting bigger. Then, out of the blue, I got better one day. They just vanished like they were never there. ‘Thank goodness,’ I thought, ‘I’m cured.’ But when I looked into it more recently, I found possession never goes away. So if that’s what caused those black bruises, then eventually, I’ll…”

“I’m pretty sure you have nothing to worry about.”

You’re totally cured, after all.

“That was a joke, silly. There’s no way I’m one of the possessed.” Claire smiles and gazes up at the night sky. “But still… There’s no guarantee I’ll be able to stick around forever… That’s why I need you to clear your schedule for fall break.”

“Ugh…”

“This isn’t up for discussion. I’m going to go let the Knight Order know what happened here.”

She turns her back to me and starts marching off.

I catch another glimpse of the sky, and sure enough, the moon really has a hint of red tonight. I kinda wanna see what these vampires are all about, and the Lawless City sounds pretty interesting, too.

I’m sitting in my dorm room listening to Beta talk.

Every night, after I’m done with my classes, I have my regularly scheduled Shadow Garden briefing.

“After the incident at the Bushin Festival, Perv has been…”

“Uh-huh.”

After thinking over everything my sister told me, I’m really starting to get fired up about going to the Lawless City.

After all, I haven’t had a chance to go bandit hunting recently, and the Lawless City is basically a glorified crew of bandits. And when it comes to outlaws, what’s theirs is mine.

“It’s made Epsilon’s job considerably easier, as well. Now, as far as the Oriana Kingdom internal affairs go…”

“Uh-huh.”

Like Claire said, I'm going to have to think about what I want to do in the future.

At the end of the day, it all comes down to money. As long as I can make some cash, everything will all work out.

And did I mention the Lawless City is full of glorified bandits?

I'd bet anything that their boss is making mad bank off all the shady stuff they're doing.

In other words, all I have to do is bust in and make off with their treasure, and my problems will go away. Easy.

"The Shadow Garden continues to grow at a satisfactory rate, and the laboratory at Alexandria has begun development on the steam engine, with…"

"Uh-huh."

If I focus on amassing enough money to spend the rest of my life goofing off, I'll never have to worry about finding a real job.

Heck, I can even try out a bunch of different unassuming jobs: a gatekeeper, a guard, a bum, a baker… The possibilities are endless.

By having access to money, one can live one's life unshackled to it.

Ooh, that sounds kinda smart.

Anyhow, there are three influential parties in the Lawless City, and unfortunately for them, one of the three is going down.

Which one should I pick, though? Eenie-meenie-miney-mo…

I mean, I could just annihilate all three, but then I wouldn't have anything to look forward to in the future.

Honestly, this Blood Queen lady sounds the most interesting, and I can think of badass ways to kill a Progenitor Vampire, but at the same time, it's the kind of thing where I wanna save the best for last.

Decisions, decisions.

As things stand, the Blood Queen really does feel like the best candidate.

"…and that concludes my report."

"Uh-huh."

"If there's anything I've omitted or overlooked, by all means, let me know…" Beta is kneeling before me with her head bowed.

"It reeks…"

When she hears me, she twitches.

"The Lawless City… It reeks of blood…"

"Thank goodness he wasn't talking about me…," Beta murmurs quietly.

"It seems the Blood Queen is up to something…"

"That's correct. We couldn't find a strong connection between her and the Cult, so we didn't feel the need to do anything about it, but…"

"A storm is coming… A storm of blood…"

"A storm of what…?"

"Look at the moon, Beta."

"Huh…?"

I point at the vaguely red moon hanging in the air outside the window.

“Huh, is it a little redder than usual…?”

“Took you long enough to notice… That’s the Red Moon…”

“—?! Wait! Is that really the legendary Red Moon…?!”

“…And if it is?”

I cast a sidelong glance at Beta, who’s staring dumbfoundedly at the sky, then hold my bloodred glass of wine up to the lamp as I take a sip.

The “legendary Red Moon,” huh?

Anything sounds cool if you stick the word *legendary* in front of it.

“Th-that can’t be…! If that’s the case, then the Lawless City—no, everything around it will be wiped out…!”

“Worry not.”

“B-but people are in danger! We need to dispatch the Shadow Garden at once—!”

“Didn’t I tell you? Worry not…”

“—Ngh!! F-forgive me…”

I look down at Beta as she trembles before I leisurely cross my legs.

“Leave this to me.”

“You don’t mean… You’re planning on handling this one alone, Master Shadow?!”

“Are you trying to stop me…?”

“I understand that’s the most efficient way to handle the situation, but… Master Shadow, what if something were to happen to you?!”

“Worry not.” The corner of my mouth curls into a grin. “After all…the moon is just a little redder than usual. Right?”

“—?!” Beta looks at me, eyes wide.

She initially looks shocked, but her face quickly softens into a gentle smile.

“I fear I forgot who I was talking to.”

She offers me a deep bow.

“The moon is just a little redder than usual… Against you, Master Shadow, even the legendary Red Moon amounts to little more than that. I’ll be praying for your success.”

Damn. All it took was the moon looking kinda red, and now it’s the “legendary Red Moon.” Beta’s always been good at this stuff.

“Don’t you think…the moon looks beautiful this way?”

“Hee-hee… So it does. And it’s thanks to you that we can see it that way.”

“Will you drink with me…?”

“Yes! Gladly.”

Beta and I gaze up at the moon as we enjoy our wine.

Looks like I’m gonna be able to start my fall break at the Lawless City with a bang.

The Lawless City is, to put it succinctly, one giant slum.

The homeless are huddled everywhere, shanties line the roads, and the foul stench of garbage permeates the air.

But that isn't all the city has to offer.

For example, it's home to a notable peculiarity—three skyscrapers towering above its streets.

"That's the Blood Queen's castle. The Crimson Tower…," comments a man who looks like a professional wrestler heel. He gazes up at the bloodred edifice. It looms over him, illuminated by the setting sun.

"What's wrong, Quinton? You chicken?"

Standing beside him is a handsome blond man.

"Like hell I'd go chicken, Goldy. I just ain't never seen a building that tall before."

"Hmm… You know, I've fought all over the world, and I have to admit, it is an impressive spire. It'd probably take all day just climbing it."

The two of them sigh as they cast their gazes up at the Crimson Tower.

It looks almost like a spiral of blood circling up into the sky. Neither of them can even begin to imagine how it was built.

"Just 'cause they got a fancy tower don't mean that the guy inside's strong. Let's get a move on."

"At the end of the day, they're just a band of hoodlums, after all. The Blood Queen's head is ours for the taking."

Quinton and Goldy's appearances make them seem like complete opposites, but they hit it off surprisingly well from the day they first met. Maybe it was because they bonded over having been beaten by the same opponent, but for whatever reason, the two of them have been working as a team since the Bushin Festival.

They walk through the Lawless City under the evening sky. The closer they get to the city's center, the less it feels like a decrepit slum and the more like a multicultural hodgepodge.

"Well, that's a surprise…"

"Yeah… Stay sharp."

People merely looking in from the outside never see this aspect of the Lawless City.

The buildings aren't the only thing that are different. The people passing by them are no longer commonplace bums, but ruthless hunters casing them with gleams in their eyes.

Not a single person around them seems like an easy target.

Quinton and Goldy immediately pick up on that.

They brace themselves as they walk, ready to draw their swords at a moment's notice. The buildings around them start to take on a unified aesthetic.

It's proof they've made it to the Blood Queen's turf.

They notice a change in the air, too.

"We're close."

Strangely, there are no signs of any residents. However, there's clearly *something* scuttling around inside the houses. Quinton and Goldy can see the Crimson Tower straight ahead.

They tighten their focus and press on.

Finally, they reach the tower.

"This must be the front entrance…!"

Quinton approaches the massive door. Ominous, inhuman figures are carefully etched across its surface. "Here we go." He reaches out to touch it, but…

"Hee-hee-hee. Stop right there…"

…someone calls out to him. The voice is painfully hoarse, to the point it's almost difficult to make out the words.

Quinton's hand freezes, and when he looks around, he spots a filthy mound of cloth piled up beside the door. Then he sees it move—there's someone wrapped up in it.

"Hee-hee-hee. You two aren't qualified enough to touch the door…"

With that, the person wearing the tattered rags stands.

It's a gaunt man. He's taller than Quinton, but his cheeks and eyes are sunken. He's little more than skin and bones. His dirty white hair stretches all the way down to his shoulders.

The best way to describe him would be a "living corpse."

"You think we aren't *qualified*?!"

"The only ones allowed to open the door are servants, guests, and the strong…"

"Gotcha… You got a point. We aren't servants, and we weren't invited. But we *are* strong as hell, and we're here to take down the Blood Queen."

Quinton looks up at the white-haired man and grins.

The man stares back at him with unblinking eyes, then laughs. "Hee, hee-hee-hee. Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee…"

“Whaddaya think you’re laughin’ at?!”

“Hee-hee-hee, I think I’m pretty stupid, but…it’s always funny when I find someone even stupider than me…”

“The hell you say?!”

“Hee-hee. You really should know your place… Now, it’s too late.”

The white-haired man sheds a section of his rags, exposing the right side of his body.

There’s nothing from the shoulder down.

“This was the result of *my* stupidity when I tried to challenge the Blood Queen four years ago… Not only did it cost me my arm, but now I’m a lowly Watchdog on a leash…”

There’s a thick collar with a chain fastened around the man’s neck.

“Ha. I’m Quinton, a Bushin Festival veteran. And he’s Goldy the Victorious Golden Dragon. We ain’t chumps like you.”

“Hee-hee. That means nothing to me… I have a policy of not remembering the names of anyone weaker than me…”

“Huh? And just who the hell are you supposed to be?”

“Hee-hee, I’m just a Watchdog… But once, long ago…they used to call me the White Demon…”

“The White Demon? Never hearda you. Goldy, you know this guy?” Quinton turns to his partner.

Goldy shakes his head. “It does sound familiar, but… Sorry, I can’t pin it down.”

However, his eyes are fixed cautiously on the Watchdog.

“And there ya have it, Mr. Nobody,” Quinton snaps.

“Hee-hee. Fine by me. The names of the stupid are best forgotten anyways…”

“No hard feelings, but we’re goin’ through that door whether you like it or not.”

“Ah, but I’m a Watchdog… I can’t just go letting weaklings by me…”

“…Eh. It’s your funeral.” Quinton glares at the Watchdog and unsheathes his blade.

The Watchdog reaches down with his left hand and draws his narrow, single-edged sword in kind. It’s a beautiful weapon and longer than he is tall.

Goldy follows suit and draws his blade. “Quinton…be careful.”

“Whaddaya mean, be careful?”

“That man… I just can’t gauge how strong he is.”

“What? That one-armed pile of skin and bones? You’re full of it!”

Quinton ignores Goldy’s warning and attacks.

His greatsword casts a shining trail through the evening sunlight—and a moment later, blood sprays.

“…Huh?”

Cleaved neatly in two, pieces of the greatsword clatter on the ground.

“Q-Quinton!” Goldy shouts, and as he does, Quinton crumples from the gaping wound in his chest.

“Now, then… Who’s next…?” The Watchdog stands before Goldy, drenched in Quinton’s blood.

“D-damn you!”

Goldy hadn’t been able to make out the Watchdog’s slash that downed his friend.

All he saw was the spray of blood and the greatsword falling.

It was an incredible display of skill.

Goldy can tell the Watchdog stands far, far above them—despite being robbed of his dominant arm and being reduced to skin and bones.

He readies his sword regardless.

He hasn’t known Quinton for long. However, they were united by the common goal to get back on their feet after the same crushing defeat.

“Don’t worry… He’s still alive. He’s no good dead, after all…” The Watchdog laughs.

“How dare you!!”

Goldy gathers magic in his sword, then unleashes his strongest attack.

“Demonic Golden Dragon! Fatality Strike!!”

The moment he releases it, his eyes meet the Watchdog’s.

The Watchdog’s eyes are black and horribly bloodshot. When Goldy meets this bottomless gaze, he suddenly remembers who the White Demon is.

“W-wait, you’re…”

The Watchdog’s lips curl upward.

If this one-armed skeleton really is the White Demon…

Understanding the insurmountable difference in their strength, Goldy makes a spur-of-the-moment choice and fires his attack into the ground.

“Hmm…?”

A massive cloud of dust billows up.

Receding footsteps echo out, and a shout reverberates through the air. “Quinton!! I swear—I swear I’ll come back for you!!”

“Fleeing, huh…? Well, I can’t follow him… I’m a Watchdog, after all…”

The Watchdog sweeps away the dust with a single swing of his sword, then watches Goldy sprint off.

“Hee-hee, but… Will he be able to get out unscathed…?”

As the Watchdog watches, the doors to the houses creak open, and their “residents” swarm Goldy.

“Hee, hee-hee-hee. Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee…!”

He looks up at the towering skyscrapers.

The Lawless City—the world’s dumping grounds, controlled by three rulers in three lofty towers.

A world operating on survival of the fittest, where evil, wealth, and power from all over the globe congregate.

A world that no kings, no knights, and no monsters can intervene in.

Welcome to the Lawless City.
A world where might makes right.

The Eminence in Shadow

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I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as
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I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
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I wanted to be one of them.
Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

Lawless City Bandit Hunting!

The Eminence in Shadow
Volume 3

Chapter 1

Chapter 1

Lawless City Bandit Hunting!

It's fall break.

Claire and I make our way to the Lawless City.

"So this is it, huh? It kinda stinks."

"Don't blame me. It is a slum, after all." She glares menacingly at the houseless people around us as she talks.

Off in the distance, I can make out three towering spires. It'd be a hoot if someone knocked 'em over like bowling pins.

"So we just have to head for the tower, right?"

"You want us to just immediately charge the enemy's stronghold?" she asked. "Good grief. The Dark Knight Association has a base set up, so we're going to head there first and get the lay of the land."

"Ah."

I follow Claire through the slum. After a little while, we arrive in an area lined with street stalls.

It's bursting with activity, and the merchants are selling all manners of strange foods, sketchy drugs, stolen goods, and odd pets.

"Hey there, pretty lady! Come have a gander! I just got some real lively pets in!"

"Who—me?"

"But of course! You're the prettiest young lady to ever walk this planet, ain'tcha?"

"Heh, someone's got a good eye. I guess it wouldn't hurt to have a little look."

"Sis, he's just trying to butter you up."

"Shut up."

Claire drags me over to the stall.

"Now, this little lovely one just came in!" The shopkeeper drags over a young blond man in a collar. "If you need a dark knight slave, young Goldy here's your man! What do you think? A hottie like him would go great with a beautiful young lady such as yourself!"

Goldy's face is covered in lacerations and bruises like he's been in a bar fight, and he groans, "Mmph, mmph!" as if trying to tell us something.

"He seems a little worse for the wear," Claire observes.

"Huh. I feel like I've seen this guy before."

"Ha-ha! Maybe he got scuffed up a bit in transport, eh? All right then, how about I drop him from thirty million *zeni* to twenty-seven million?"

“That’s pretty expensive.”

“Oh, no, missy. A dark knight slave of this caliber’d run you double that anywhere else. You won’t get prices like this anywhere but the Lawless City!”

“Well, I’m not in the market.”

“Hey, hey, hey, looks like someone knows how to haggle! Well then, just for today, how about I throw in another fine stallion?!”

“You call them stallions?!”

“Feast your eyes on this beaut of a dark knight! This here’s Quinton!”

The man the shopkeeper drags out has the face of a pro wrestler heel and a large gash across his belly. At least it looks like the wound’s been treated.

Quinton groans, too. “Rngh, rngh!” I wonder what he’s trying to tell us.

You know, he also looks kinda familiar…

“Goldy and Quinton, forty mil for the set!! You won’t see deals like this anywhere else!!”

“What about that cut on his stomach?”

“Oh no, he got knocked around during transport, too?! Then hey, thirty-seven mil for the set! I can’t go any lower than that!”

“Like I said, I’m not in the market.”

“What?! Say it ain’t so, miss!!”

“I’ve got the only one I need here, after all.” Claire roughly musses up my hair.

“Ah, so the kid’s your…”

“Please don’t get the wrong idea,” I beg.

“Come on, we’re going.” Claire grabs me by the scruff of my neck and drags me off.

As she does, someone else calls out to the shopkeeper.

“Hey, Shopkeep. If you were serious about sellin’ those two for thirty-seven mil, you’ve got a deal.”

“Oh, I’m always serious about prices! Pleasure doing business! Hmm? Wait, you’re…”

“Mmph, mmph!”

“Rngh, rngh!”

I guess the two of them got sold after all.

I was kinda worried ’cause I felt like I’d seen their faces somewhere before, but all’s well that ends well.

Wait a minute…

If they just got sold, that means that the stand has at least thirty-seven million *zeni* on hand. All I have to do is attack it, and…

No, no. I can’t let myself be distracted by chump change.

It’s better to dream big.

“Come on, pick up the pace.”

“I can walk just fine without you dragging me, you know.”

“If I don’t haul you along, I’m sure you’ll find some way to get yourself lost.”

“What? No, I won’t.”

As we walk, I gaze up at the three towering skyscrapers.

One red, one black, one white.

Eenie-meenie-miney-mo…

When we arrive at the Dark Knight Association’s base, my sister immediately gets called into a meeting. Apparently, they’re getting all the notable dark knights together to have some sort of discussion.

I don’t get an invite.

Claire tries desperately to get me in, but her efforts are in vain.

“Wait here like a good boy and don’t move an inch,” she commands me, then joins the assembly.

The moment she does, I decide to go for a stroll. Like a good boy.

When I get outside, I find the sun has already set. The sky is still bright from its afterglow, but the reddish moon has begun making its heavenly ascent to the east.

With each passing day, the moon seems to get even redder, and I’m pretty sure I’m not just imagining things. I guess the moon in this world really is different from the one back on Earth…

The people of the Lawless City pay the moon no heed as they mill about on their business. They focus on the things they need to get through the day—for some, that’s their next customer, and for others, their next mark.

To honor that spirit, I mark the occasion by crossing paths with ten different pickpockets.

I leave my wallet in a super conspicuous pocket, so it keeps getting snatched, but whenever someone steals it, I make sure to return the favor.

In other words, I take my wallet back, and theirs along with it.

Survival of the fittest, baby.

Remember, getting revenge is fair play.

Just today, my wallet’s contents have swelled from forty thousand *zeni* to a hundred and ten thousand. What a strange world we live in.

Maybe my true calling is to become Background Resident A in the Lawless City.

As far as I’m concerned, any city where you can make money just by going on a stroll is basically paradise.

As I walk along, struck by the urge to start humming, I hear a scream.

“A ghoul! There’s a ghoul!!”

Huh. And pretty close to where I am, it sounds like.

The Lawless City’s residents react quickly. The people who can’t fight immediately flee the area.

However, a bunch of the stalls continue doing business as if they didn't even hear the shriek. Another group of people even head toward the direction it came from with grins on their faces.

"Ghouls, huh? We've been getting a lot of those lately."

"Perfect. I need to relieve some stress."

One guy cracks his knuckles, and another draws a knife.

Yeah, I feel that. I like to rubberneck whenever stuff's going down, too. I stealthily tail them to the scene.

When we get there, the ghoul's already been captured.

Looks like someone broke its legs. It's rolling around on the ground.

Someone kicks it. "Take that! That's what you get for biting my arm!"

Someone stomps on it. "Dammit! I lost big on my bet!! And it's all your fault!!"

Someone snaps its bones. "I gave Marie a million *zeni*, but she dumped me anyways!! And you're to blame!!"

A pool of blood spreads across the ground.

Ah, I get it. Ghouls are hard to kill, so they make for satisfying punching bags.

The ghoul groans, completely at their mercy. That's the Lawless City for you.

Stuff like this probably happens all the time around these parts.

A city drenched in blood and slaughter—I like the sound of that.

"Heh-heh-heh."

I lean against the wall with my arms crossed as I let out a low chuckle. Being in the Lawless City is getting me in the mood to do my "mysterious young man" shadowbroker routine.

Eventually, the ghoul collapses lifelessly to the side, and the mob gets bored.

Guess the show's over.

Also, it's gotten pretty dark.

The moment I start thinking about heading back, though, I sense the ghoul regain its strength.

"Ahh!! N-no!"

A man's scream and a spray of blood fill the air.

The reanimated ghoul drives its teeth into one man's neck and rips out his trachea.

"Wh-what's happening?! They aren't supposed to do that!!"

Another victim falls.

However, despite their agitation, the other men draw their swords.

The risen ghoul is…red.

Its skin and eyes are both as red as blood, and it bares its jagged fangs and claws as it roars. "GROOOOOAH!!"

Then, it launches into a bestial leap.

Its claws cleave through one man's neck, slicing it clean off.

"R-run!!"

That’s enough to make even people from the Lawless City start to scramble.

The ghoul sinks its teeth into one of the corpses and begins chewing. I grin, lean against the wall, and chuckle. “Heh-heh-heh…”

Now what?

Should I flee like all the other background characters? Or should I continue playing the part of the mysterious young man?

I’m probably never gonna run into any of these people again, so I do have the option of not pursuing an NPC lifestyle this time around.

“Heh-heh-heh…”

Hmm.

As I ponder my choices, I sense a presence overhead.

No sooner do I look up than a slender warrior comes swooping down on the red ghoul from above. Upon landing, the warrior brings their sword down and bisects the red ghoul starting from the head.

The blow is clean.

Having slain the red ghoul in a single strike, the warrior swings their sword to shake it clean of blood.

Our eyes meet.

She’s a thin, attractive redhead dressed all in black and wearing a wide-brimmed hat. We stare at each other for a little while.

“You should leave…” Her voice is surprisingly cute. “The rampage is beginning…”

With a tormented look on her face, she gazes up at the red moon hanging in the sky.

“The moon is red… There’s no time…”

She’s trying to say her bit and leave, but I stop her. “Who are you…?”

“I’m Mary, the Ancient Vampire Hunter… And I’m here to hunt Elisabeth the Blood Queen…”

And with that, she vanishes into the night.

What’s…what’s with this feeling?

It’s like my chest is throbbing.

“Heh-heh-heh…”

A grin spreads across my face as I look up at the red moon.

Looks like it’s gonna be a little longer before I make it back to the base… I hope Claire doesn’t get too mad.

When night falls on the Lawless City, the most crowded area is invariably the red-light district.

Scantily clad women saunter up and down the streets, trying to entice male passersby.

Suddenly, a scream echoes through the air.

“Ghoul!! It’s a ghoul!!”

However, little troubles are just a part of life. The brothel’s bouncer heads outside and makes quick work of the creature.

On any other day, that would have been the end of it.

“Ah! Ahhhhhhhhhhh!!”

One of the girls screams as the bouncer is mercilessly ripped to shreds.

This ghoul is redder than usual. It tears through the bouncer with ease, then makes its way toward the shell-shocked girl.

“Marie!!” one of her friends calls out to her, but it’s too late.

However, the red ghoul is suddenly split in half.

“Huh…?”

Rent in two, it topples over, revealing a swordsman wearing a jet-black longcoat standing behind it.

He swings his ebony blade to clear off the blood, then looks down at Marie.

His eyes gleam red beneath his deep hood.

“Eek…”

Scared by those inscrutable eyes, Marie shrinks back.

“If you want to live, then flee…” The jet-black man’s voice echoes like it’s coming from the bowels of the earth.

“…the rampage is starting.”

As he murmurs, he looks up at the scarlet moon. It feels like there’s a deep sorrow hidden within that form of his.

“The Red Moon… There isn’t much time left.”

For some reason, the moon’s been red as of late.

Marie had thought it strange, but none of her sex-worker friends had paid much attention to it.

The moon being red doesn’t change anything, they’d all thought.

“W-wait… Who are you?” Marie calls out to stop the jet-black man from leaving.

He looks like he’s busy, but he *did* just save her life. She needs to at least thank him…

“The name’s Shadow. I lurk in the darkness and hunt down shadows…”

And with that, Shadow vanishes into the night.

“Wait…I need to thank you…” Marie looks around, searching for the suddenly missing man.

“Marie!! Are you okay?!” Her coworker wraps her in a tight embrace.

“Y-yeah. I’m fine…”

“Thank heavens… This kind of stuff’s been happening all the time lately. I dunno if it’s the Blood Queen or what, but…”

“Sh-shh! You can’t say stuff like that…”

“Hmph. Who’s gonna stop me? More importantly, that was Shadow just now…”

“You know him?!”

“Yeah, but only the rumors. They say he attacked a school, blew up the Sanctuary, and runs a gang of hooligans.”

He was a little scary, but Marie doesn’t think he looked like a bad person.

“Shadow can’t be that bad…”

“What’re you talking about? He’s as big a villain as our three rulers. But what’s a big shot like him doing in the Lawless City…?”

“He said something about a rampage starting. That the moon was red and that there wasn’t any time…”

He must know something.

He must have noticed the red moon that nobody else paid attention to, then deduced the reason behind it.

Marie gets the sense that he’s doing it to protect them all.

“What’s up with that?” her friend rants. “The Blood Queen’s been on a tear recently. Is she gonna team up with Shadow and start another war? C’mon, gimme a break! It’s always us little guys who get caught in the cross fire.”

“That’s not it. Shadow… He’s here to stop something from happening.”

“Oh yeah? Like what?”

“It’s… I don’t know what it is, but it’s definitely something bad.”

Something’s begun.

Marie looks up uneasily at the red moon.

However, she's sure Shadow will do something about it.

"Thank you, Shadow…"

She looks out to where Shadow vanished into the night and whispers to herself.

Cid is missing.

Claire dashes through the darkened Lawless City in search of her brother.

"That idiot! I told him not to move an inch!"

When she heard that he'd left the base on his own, her mind went blank.

One of the other dark knights laughed, saying Cid was probably being sold as a slave as they spoke. Claire decked him, then immediately rushed out.

The Lawless City is dangerous at night.

It isn't just an ordinary slum. A dark knight student like Cid would be chum in the water for some of the people who lived here.

"Has anyone seen a kid who looks about fifteen with black hair and dark eyes?!" she asks the passersby as she frantically scans the streets.

There are some who take that as an opportunity to attack her, but she dispatches them all. Her skills are no joke—she did win the Bushin Festival, after all.

She's following an eyewitness's lead, then finally spots the raven locks she's looking for.

However…the young man in question is currently being devoured by a ghoul in a back alley.

"N-no!!"

She draws her sword in a flash and minces the ghoul to pieces. Her rage only serves to accelerate her blade, and the sound of her tempestuous slashes hums across the alley.

Once she's done, she kneels in front of the mangled dark-haired boy.

"No…this can't…"

His black locks are drenched in blood. And it's just about the same length as Cid's.

The corpse is too disfigured to properly identify. However, this was the only eyewitness account that matched her description.

"Cid, I'm so sorry… I never should have brought you here…"

There's no guarantee that the boy in front of her is Cid. Even so, she embraces his bloody black hair and sobs.

It feels like the regret and remorse are going to crush her.

As she's being racked by emotion, someone approaches her from behind.

"…What?" she barks, still holding the body.

“Were you the one searching for a boy with black hair and eyes…?”

“…Huh?”

Hoping against hope, she turns around and looks at the redheaded swordswoman.

“Who are you…?”

“I’m Mary, a vampire hunter. I’ve seen two kids that match that description.”

“—?! Where?!”

“I saw the first one a little bit ago. He was standing across from a rampaging ghoul and going ‘heh-heh-heh’ with a grin on his face.”

Claire pictures it, then immediately dismisses the possibility.

“That’s not him. My brother’s laugh isn’t nearly that creepy.”

“Noted. The second was a dark knight. One of the Blood Queen’s minions attacked him and carted him off.”

“—! What did he look like?!”

“He was kind of plain. Nothing about him really stood out.”

That has to be Cid. Claire is certain of it.

“Oh no… Cid…”

“I’m sorry. I tried to save him, but I was too late.”

“…B-but if they carted him off, that means he’s still alive, right?!”

“…He’s probably…” Mary wavers, unsure if she should say it.

“What?! You know something?!”

“He’s probably…going to be sacrificed. The Red Moon is starting soon. If you don’t save him before then…”

“Please, tell me! Where did they take him?! How can I rescue him?!”

Mary’s gaze wanders as she thinks. It chances upon the shredded ghoul.

“Did you do that?”

“Huh? Ah, yeah. That was me.”

“If we work together…there might still be a chance… My target is Elisabeth the Blood Queen. Your goal is to save your brother. We just might be able to work together.” Mary offers Claire her hand. “If you agree to help me, I’ll tell you everything I know.”

Claire takes it without hesitation. “Done. I’ll do anything to save Cid.”

“Follow me.”

Mary proceeds deeper into the alley.

Claire rises to her feet and casts aside the bloody, dark-haired corpse. Upon closer inspection, his hair doesn’t look anything like Cid’s.

“Hold on, Cid. Your big sister’s coming to rescue you…!”

She clenches her fists, then vanishes deeper into the alleyway after Mary.

Claire follows Mary to a rundown building. For whatever reason, it's practically buried under a thick layer of sediment.

Mary takes a lamp and illuminates its interior. It reeks of dust and mold.

"There's a chair over there…," Mary says, still standing.

"I'm fine."

The chair looks to be on the verge of collapse anyway.

"Fair enough. Claire, was it? Now, your brother's probably in the Blood Queen's castle, the Crimson Tower."

"What did you mean when you said he was going to be sacrificed?"

"To explain that, I'd need to start by telling you about Elisabeth the Blood Queen. She was a Progenitor Vampire, and she and the other Progenitors used to rule the night. This story took place over a thousand years ago…"

Mary gets a distant look in her eyes as she speaks.

"The vampires used to rule the night, but that came to an end when the humans learned of their weaknesses. As soon as that happened, the roles of hunter and prey were reversed. Vampires have three weaknesses. First, they die if their hearts are destroyed. Although they're feared for their immortality and incredible regenerative powers, they can no longer revive if their hearts are destroyed. Learning that fact was a great boon to the humans, who lived in fear of them. Second, they lose their powers if they fail to drink blood. Any vampire who goes too long without blood becomes no stronger than an average human. Thus, they're biologically forced to coexist with humanity, unable to ever exterminate them fully. Third and finally, they turn to ash if they're struck by the sun's light. No matter how strong they are and how weak we are, all a human has to do to kill them is find a way to hit them with sunlight. They can employ traps, destroy their dwellings… The possibilities are endless. Because of that, the daytime came to serve as their execution grounds."

"You certainly know your stuff."

As Claire listens to Mary's explanation, she finds herself impressed by the depths of Mary's knowledge.

There aren't many who are know much about vampires.

After all, they're largely a thing of the past, and the number of vampire-related casualties in recent years has been close to zero.

The Lawless City is an exception. Rumor has it the Crimson Tower is the vampires' final stronghold.

That said, even the people running the Association's meeting haven't been able to confirm whether there were actually vampires there yet, and their only knowledge on the matter was academic.

"Humanity eventually drove them out. Vampires vanished from the night altogether, and people gradually began forgetting about them. Then, a thousand years ago, there was a terrible tragedy… When the Red Moon hung in the sky, an entire country was obliterated overnight. It was a small

country, and today, history has forgotten its very name… But Elisabeth the Blood Queen and her followers were the ones responsible for the deed."

"When you say the 'Red Moon,' are you talking about how the moon's been getting a little red recently?"

Mary nods. "It drastically increases the power of vampires and their minions. The vampires had been driven to the wall, but on that night, they mounted their rebellion. It lasted three days. A country fell the first night, and three more suffered catastrophic damages over the next two. Then, when the Red Moon ended, the Blood Queen and her followers suddenly disappeared, waiting in hiding until mankind had forgotten about them…"

"So you mean the vampires are plotting another revolution?"

Mary nods again. "They consider humanity livestock, and they've never forgotten the disgrace of having those pigs overthrow them. Right now, the Blood Queen is in a thousand-year slumber, and her close adviser, Crimson, is leading the vampires. When the Red Moon begins, Crimson plans to revive the Blood Queen. If he does, the millennia-old tragedy will happen all over again…"

"Wait! So the sacrifice is…?" Claire's voice trembles as her brother's face flashes through her mind.

"Reviving the Blood Queen requires the lifeblood of a young man blessed with a lot of magic. They're probably planning on using your brother as that sacrifice…"

"I won't let them! When does the Red Moon start?!"

Mary looks through the hole-ridden wall at the moon outside, already stained a deep crimson.

They hear something that sounds like a scream from the distance.

"It just did…"

More screams echo through the night.

"Ghooooooouls!! R-ruuuuuun!!"

A great clamor rises, and the stench of blood fills the air.

"The rampage just started… In other words, the Red Moon gave them tremendous amounts of power. In exchange, though, they're being assailed with an uncontrollable urge to drink blood. And it's only going to get worse from here…"

"…!! What about Cid?! You said he's in the Crimson Tower, right?!"

"Hold your horses."

Mary stops Claire from rushing off.

"To be on the safe side, Crimson will probably wait until the moment the moon is at its very reddest to revive the Blood Queen. There's still about twelve hours left before then."

"Twelve hours? But it'll be the middle of the day!!"

"The Red Moon lasts for three full days. And during those days, the night never breaks. But don't worry. I have a plan."

With that, Mary begins ripping up the weathered floorboards.

"In preparation for this day…I dug a hole."

“…A hole?” Claire tilts her head to the side.

Sure enough, there’s something there.

Beneath the floorboards, there’s an opening just large enough for a person to crawl through.

“Normally, the Crimson Tower is swarming with minions, so getting in is nigh impossible. But now that the Red Moon’s started, they’re all outside. That gives us a rare chance to sneak in…”

“So you mean, this hole…”

“Invading from aboveground is tricky. But this lets us go in from below.”

“…Clever.”

“Let’s go over this one last time. My goal is killing Elisabeth the Blood Queen, and yours is saving your brother. Are you ready to work together?”

“Absolutely. Glad to have you in my corner, Mary.”

“Right back at you, Claire.”

The two exchange a handshake.

“Now, if that’s decided, let’s go. I’m coming, Cid.” Claire slips into the hole without a shred of hesitation.

Mary lets Claire go on ahead, then turns around and looks back up at the scarlet moon.

There’s a pained look in her eyes.

“I’m coming, Queen Elisabeth…”

And with that, she follows after Claire.

When I get back to the Dark Knight Association’s base, my sister is gone.

I guess she must have gone for a walk, too.

I don’t have anything to do, so I decide to turn in for the night.

—When I wake up, the Lawless City is trashed.

“Wait…”

It should be morning by now, but it’s still dark out, a crimson moon is hanging in the sky, and ghouls are running wild through the streets.

“Is this the ‘rampage’…?”

That Mary chick mentioned an important key word.

Apparently, everyone at the base is holding an emergency meeting to decide how to respond.

I woke up immediately when I sensed a flurry of activity, so it looks like I didn’t miss the party. I think. I slip out of the base, find a tall building, and stand on top of it clad in black.

“Ah, the time has finally come…!”

This is it. This is the real deal.

The big vampire event is finally upon us!

I grin thoughtfully beneath my mask as my black longcoat flutters behind me.

The key words are “Red Moon,” “rampage,” and “Blood Queen,” huh…?

Oh right, and there’s some lady called the “Ancient Vampire Hunter.” I gotta make sure I hit her up during the party.

It’s gonna be hard, but I have to come up with a schedule for the event that’ll let me have the most fun.

Given how things are going, I assume the ultimate goal is defeating the Blood Queen.

Sounds like the best strategy for me is to head to the Crimson Tower and start looting it. That way, I can kill two birds with one stone. Once I’m there, I can just stay flexible and play it by ear.

Wait, I just remembered. Claire isn’t back yet.

Eh, she’s a tough cookie. She’ll be fine. Hell, given that it’s Claire we’re talking about, there’s a decent chance she’s storming the Crimson Tower right this moment.

As for me, everyone knows that you gotta kick off events like these by hunting some ghouls.

Marie watches her final customer of the day leave, then closes her door.

As the moonlight streams into her room, she casts a glance at her disheveled sheets and picks up her undergarments strewn on the ground.

After tugging them back on, she collapses onto her bed. Her comely face sinks into her pillow.

She’s exhausted from the day’s crazy events, and her customers weren’t exactly great, either. She decides to just pass out.

“Bluhh…”

However, between her sheets damp with bodily secretions and the stifling smell in the air, she can’t get comfortable. She sighs and opens the window.

The sticky smell fades, but it’s replaced by the commotion outside.

“I wonder what’s going on…?”

Normally, the sun would be coming up around this time, and the red-light district would be closing up and going quiet for the day.

Today, though, dawn refuses to break, and the entire district seems to be in chaos. The bright red moon is still hanging in the sky.

Off in the distance, she sees flames licking the sides of a building. There’s been a fire.

She can faintly make out the smell of smoke on the wind.

However, there’s a smell that assails her nose even more strongly. It’s rusty and pungent.

The fire is off in the distance, so it shouldn’t reach her.

Something is off. The streets are filled with people frantically running. Why are they panicking? It’s just a fire, after all.

As Marie stands in the window, the moon casts her in a beguiling red glow, setting off her pale skin and dark panties. Her fuchsia hair and eyes burn vividly in the moonlight.

Normally, a beautiful woman standing in the window wearing nothing but her unmentionables would cause hordes of men to stop in their tracks and stare.

Today, though, there's no such crowd.

The look in Marie's eyes seems almost cold as she gazes at the distant fire and the district as a whole.

She's spent five years in this town after being sold here at age thirteen. Everyone who comes to the Lawless City wants to leave at first. But as time goes on, that desire dulls, and eventually the Lawless City stains them with its colors.

Marie hasn't given up just yet.

As of late, though, she's been considering resigning herself to her fate. It'd probably make things easier on her.

Although she's made a name for herself among the red-light district's sex workers, she isn't at the top of the pack. Her madam told her, however, that she could become number one if she set her mind to it.

That would be a perfectly reasonable way for her to live her life. All she has to do is forget everything and drown herself in the transient pleasures of the night…

"Sigh…"

It's been a while since she last thought about the world outside. Little by little everyone forgets about it, and bit by bit the Lawless City paints them over and makes them part of itself. One day, that'll include her…

She goes to close her window, when—

"Eek!"

A beast leaps through it and into her room.

No, not a beast. A humanoid carrying themselves like one—a ghoul.

"Ah, ahh…"

Her room is small. There's nowhere to run.

Marie shrinks back across her bed.

The ghoul grins, putting its sharp fangs on full display, then pounces toward her.

"N-no…"

Tears roll down her cheeks.

In that moment, she realizes she's going to die.

"I told you… Flee…," booms a low voice.

In an instant, the ghoul is torn to shreds. Corpse chunks rain down as blood sprays across the room.

"Y-you're…" Marie's heart throbs upon seeing that familiar figure with his ebony blade.

It's a man wearing a jet-black longcoat—Shadow.

"The rampage has begun… Behold, the town is stained with blood…"

“The town…?” As she covers herself up with her sheets, Marie peeks outside.

“…Oh god.”

She doesn’t know when it happened, but the streets are wet with blood.

There are grisly corpses and rampaging ghouls everywhere. Many of the sex workers don’t make it out in time, and they’re attacked the moment they step outside.

“L-look out…!”

Marie’s coworker numbers among their ranks, and Marie lets out an unthinking scream.

The next moment, though, the ghoul attacking her is hacked to pieces.

“The rampage has begun… And now, the storm of blood rages…”

A man in a black longcoat is standing behind it.

“Huh?!”

Marie looks across her room, but there’s no one there.

“Flee, before it’s too late…”

Then, a scream rings out from down the street.

In the brief moment it snatches Marie’s attention, Shadow vanishes again.

“The rampage…blood…flee…”

She can hear his voice, but she’s not sure where from. The bodies of dead ghouls go flying through the air.

Now that she takes a better look, she realizes that the grisly corpses along the street are all ghouls, too.

She can’t see Shadow himself, but she can tell that the creatures being eviscerated are starting to get farther away.

“Is he…protecting us?”

Marie is certain her intuition was on the mark. She knew Shadow had come to save them.

She quickly gets dressed, packs her things, and leaps out the second-floor window.

“Thank you, Mr. Shadow…”

She gazes in the direction he vanished with passion in her eyes.

She vows to repay him someday…then takes advantage of the confusion to make her escape.

The Dark Knight Association is overwhelmed.

They rounded up their finest to mount a counteroffensive against the ghouls, but between the creatures’ enhanced powers and overwhelming numbers, the Association was forced to retreat.

“Graine the Strong is wounded, too!! We have to fall back!”

“Stop talkin’ nonsense! That’s your post!! If you don’t hold it, who will?!”

“Not my problem!! We’ve got men down! You want me to just let them die?!”

A group of dark knights is surrounded on the main road. They’re trying to mount a resistance, but the seemingly endless throng of ghouls is wearing them down.

“Everyone! Please, follow your orders!”

Claudia, the elite Association member in charge of commanding the anti–Blood Queen operation, desperately strains her voice, but it’s only a matter of time before morale crumbles.

The road is overflowing with ghoul corpses.

Expert dark knights are nothing but impressive, and everyone present can handily outmatch a ghoul.

However, nobody expected they’d be attacked by quite so many.

This evil plot must have taken years to plan.

Even with all the dark knights they’ve assembled, they can’t so much as reach the Crimson Tower’s base. So *this* is what the Blood Queen, the woman who controls a third of the Lawless City, is capable of…

Even the Dark Knight Association has had a long-standing “Don’t get involved with the Lawless City” policy. Claudia fully understands why, and she curses her superiors for having gone against it.

“Those worthless geezers.”

Normally, she would never refer to them so harshly in public. That dirty geezer who squeezes her butt, that nasty one with eyes always locked on her chest, that horndog who won’t stop trying to make advances on her, that…oh, she can go on and on.

She makes up her mind to ignore her orders and issue the command to retreat. If those geezers demote her for it, she’ll just hand in her resignation straight to their solar plexuses.

The only problem is that she and the others are currently stuck in a throng of ghouls.

Evacuating is easier said than done.

“I was too late, huh…?” she mutters in self-derision. If only she’d made her choice earlier.

She’d put off making a decision to protect her own status, and now she was reaping the rewards of her foolishness.

Claudia draws the sword from her back and steels herself.

She has no intention of putting her life on the line for those geezers, and to be totally honest, she doesn’t much care what happens to the egotistical meatheads under her command, either.

Still, she’s the one who put off the decision, so she needs to be the one to take responsibility.

“We’re retreating! I’ll cover our rear!”

She started as a normal dark knight and worked her way up the ranks herself. Contrary to appearances, she’s confident in her sword arm.

“Hell yeah, she said we’re retreating!!”

“Hah, the rear’s all yours! I’m outta here!”

The dark knights stream past her, fleeing the scene.

At least one of you could have stayed behind to help! she shouts silently in her heart as she starts slicing through the ghouls.

Ghouls rush forward. Dark knights sprint back. And then there’s Claudia, fighting for her life as she tries desperately to stay between the two groups.

However, manning the rear alone is far too great a task for Claudia, and she quickly hits her limit.

When she slips on a puddle of blood, the ghouls descend upon her.

“Rgh…!” Claudia closes her eyes—

A black swordsman descends from the night.

“Huh, aren’t you…?”

In a single swing of his sword, he sweeps away the ghouls straddling her prone body. She’s captivated by his superb form.

The swordsman in black stoops down low and draws his sword back.

Then—

“Now fall…*Ebony Swirl*.”

The black swordsman’s blade extends until it’s several times as long as he is tall.

Then, a jet-black whirlwind bursts forth.

It slices through the ghouls like they’re slips of paper, decimating their ranks in the blink of an eye.

“You’re kidding…”

Still collapsed on her rump, Claudia gazes up at the black swordsman.

Seeing the beautiful arc his sword cast and the density of the magic packed into it has set her heart aflutter. She’s a respectable dark knight in her own right, so she can tell how abnormal his strength is.

The fleeing dark knights stop in their tracks and gaze at the black swordsman in astonishment. A clamor spreads through their ranks.

“Wh-who is that guy…?”

“He wiped out all the ghouls like it was nothing…”

Seemingly indifferent to the ruckus he’s caused, the swordsman speaks in a voice that sounds like it’s echoing from the abyss itself. “The rampage has begun… This is beyond you people…”

“The rampage…?”

“The moon is red, which means time is short…”

A red moon hangs in the dark sky.

Claudia can’t think of a time she’s ever seen it that color before. She’d thought it a little creepy, but she had no idea why it was like that.

“The moon is red… Wait…”

At that moment, Claudia connects the dots between everything that’s going on in the Lawless City and an old legend she heard as a child.

“You’re saying that that’s the Red Moon…?!”

If it was, they were all in danger. When the Red Moon last appeared a thousand years ago, vampires decimated an entire country overnight. If things kept on like this, that tragedy was about to be repeated.

Claudia calls out to the black swordsman as he turns to leave. “W-wait! Please, as a member of the Dark Knight Association, I’m asking for your help!”

Having his insane power on their side would be an enormous boon. Selling her shitty bosses on the idea was going to be a struggle, but still…

His response is flat. “That won’t be necessary—I’ll end this soon.”

“You’ll end this…?” Claudia shivers. “Wait, you’re planning on taking on the Blood Queen alone…?!”

It couldn’t be done.

The Red Moon and the Blood Queen were practically on the level of natural disasters. It took an entire country mobilizing to stand up to them.

But for this black swordsman—maybe it wasn’t so impossible after all.

“Wh-who exactly are you…?”

“The name’s Shadow. I lurk in the darkness and hunt down shadows…”

His jet-black longcoat flutters as he walks atop the carpet of blood. In shock, Claudia watches him leave.

“That was Shadow…,” she mumbles.

His footsteps click as they become more and more distant.

At his destination lies the Crimson Tower lording over the city and the dark red moon shining above it.

“Master Crimson, the sacrifice is ready.”

“I see…”

Crimson has been looking down over the Lawless City, but his gaze shifts to the moon floating in the night sky. His wine-red hair washes down past his elegant features.

“The Red Moon…isn’t ready yet…”

The moon is stained red, but it isn’t enough. He has to keep waiting if he wants to be absolutely sure.

“How is gaining control of the city proceeding?” he ventures to ask.

“Things have begun according to plan. But…”

“But?” Crimson whirls around and fixes his gaze on his tongue-tied subordinate.

The man’s eyes dart around as he continues. “But…a few localities have offered more resistance than we anticipated.”

“Is it the Dark Knight Association’s doing?”

“No, they aren’t proving a threat. However, there are three people who are. One is Yukime the Spirit Fox. Another is Juggernaut the Tyrant.”

“*Those* two…”

Crimson grimaces as he looks back down over the city. The ghoul swarm is spreading out and expanding its area of influence well, but there are three waves fighting against the tide.

Crimson is all too familiar with Yukime the Spirit Fox, ruler of the White Tower, and Juggernaut the Tyrant, ruler of the Black Tower. He's suffered bitter losses at their hands many times before. Although he's loath to admit it, both of them are a fair bit more powerful than he is.

Now, though, things are different.

The Red Moon has begun. All he needs to do is resurrect his Queen, and they, too, will sink into the ocean of blood.

"Heh-heh-heh… Let them do as they please. It's not as though they can reach us. When the Blood Queen is reborn, our victory will be assured…"

Crimson laughs as he approaches the coffin enshrined in the middle of the room.

"Oh, my beloved Queen… Soon, this world shall be ours…"

As he strokes the coffin, he suddenly realizes something.

"Wait, you said three people. Who's the third?"

Crimson only knows of two with the strength to stand against the Red Moon.

"W-w-we're not entirely certain yet. But we know he's taken out a number of ghouls on his own, as well as the vampires we sent as reinforcements."

"What…?"

"His name is Shadow. As we see it, he may well pose the biggest threat to us…"

"Shadow…"

Crimson frowns as he whispers the name.

The Eminence in Shadow

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I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as
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I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
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I wanted to be one of them.
Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

Storming the Crimson Tower!

The Eminence in Shadow
Volume 3

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

Storming the Crimson Tower!

There are three forces rushing toward the Crimson Tower.

One is the Tyrant on a violent rampage.

The man is like a tanned goliath. His weapon is a massive, billhook-shaped slab of iron, and he uses it in conjunction with his raw brute strength to cleave through the ghouls.

Nobody dares get near him. The moment they do, they're bound to be reduced to mincemeat.

The next force is the Spirit Fox, prancing toward the tower.

She's a foxwoman with bewitching beauty and fur the color of snow. Nine tails shine in the moonlight. Each of her hands holds an iron-ribbed folding fan, and she weaves an elegant dance as she slices through ghoul after ghoul.

The moment their eyes are led astray by the alluring skin peeking out from within her kimono, she brings them to their eternal slumber.

As they massacre their way through the creatures, the two forces crash into each other.

"Screw you, vixen!"

"What a positively troublesome man you are." The Spirit Fox skillfully repels the Tyrant's billhook.

When it smashes into the ground, a large cloud of dust flies up.

"Been a while, Spirit Fox." A fiendish smile spreads across Juggernaut's face.

Yukime sighs in annoyance. "I, personally, would have preferred not to see you at all."

"Hey, I'm just here for the bloodsuckers. But I'm happy to put your ass in the ground, too." Juggernaut brandishes his gigantic weapon like it's a toy.

"Nobody likes a persistent man, you know." Yukime readies her fans in turn.

But the moment the two of them are about to attack, the final force converges on their position.

A man wearing a jet-black longcoat silently descends through the night.

Then, in the blink of an eye, he vivisects his three vampiric pursuers.

Seeing the man's agility stuns the Tyrant. His movements are smooth, explosive, overwhelmingly powerful. Even the Tyrant finds himself forced to admit the man is strong.

What impresses the Spirit Fox is the way he handles his sword.

She's lived a long time, but she's never seen such beautiful swordplay or such efficient, economical technique. His sword dance is practically an art, to the point that it amazes even Yukime.

The two speak in unison.

"Who the hell're you…?"

"And who might this be…?"

The man in black turns to look at them as he shakes the blood clean from his sword.

"My name is Shadow. I lurk in the darkness and hunt down shadows…"

And with that, the three forces collide.

Each of them tries to stare the others down.

Yukime's eyes are like pools of still water, Juggernaut's are black and have a falcon-like glint in them, and Shadow's are red, glowing, and inhuman.

"Shadow…? I feel like I've heard of ya before."

"Rumor has it that there lies a mysterious armed group called the Shadow Garden outside the city. Its leader goes by the same name, it would seem."

"Oh, so he's *that* Shadow."

"The rumors were of questionable veracity, but the man has the skills to support these claims, it seems."

Their steely gazes bear down on Shadow, but he doesn't seem to mind.

The wind blows, causing Shadow's sword to whistle. Yukime unfurls her fans, and Juggernaut hoists his billhook up onto his shoulder.

The wordless standoff draws on.

Juggernaut is the first to break the silence. "Are we just gonna keep staring at each other? Or are we gonna get this death match started?"

"If there is going to be killing, I would like to have Mr. Shadow on my side. Pray pardon, Mr. Shadow, what say you?" Yukime casts an amorous glance Shadow's way.

Juggernaut scoffs. "Hey, word to the wise, don't trust that fox. She'd kill you in your sleep."

"—This is insipid." Despite the gravity of the situation, Shadow turns his back on the other two without a shred of trepidation. "The Red Moon has risen, and the rampage has begun… I don't have time to waste playing around with you people."

"Turnin' your back on me? That takes balls." Juggernaut glares at the back in question.

"It would seem you have a peculiar insight into this situation. The Red Moon… I feel as though I've heard that name before…"

"You goin' senile in your old age, Grandma?"

"Quiet. As Mr. Shadow said, I, too, verily believe fighting here would be a waste of time. I only came hither because I did not want to lose any more of my people to the ghouls. You're the same, no?"

"You and I ain't got nothin' in common. The Lawless City doesn't need three towers, so I just figured I'd come and knock one of the spares over, that's all."

"Your efforts would be better spent on the Blood Queen, no?"

"Screw this, I'm out. I'll kill you next time, hag." Juggernaut glares at Yukime and Shadow, then leaves.

Yukime watches him go, but stops Shadow before he can follow suit.

"Wait. Truth is, Mr. Shadow, I know who you are. I run the pleasure houses here, you see."

Shadow looks at Yukime out of the corner of his eye.

"Word has it that a number of my girls owe you their lives. I owe you a debt, certainly, and I would love a chance to show you my appreciation sometime, if you'd let me."

"I don't need your thanks… It wasn't like I was trying to save them."

Shadow's shoes click as he walks away.

"And they were all so thankful, too… What humble man crosses our path… I will wait as long as it takes, just know that the White Tower's doors are always open to you."

Yukime bows toward Shadow's back.

"I do think we shall meet anon."

With a coquettish smile, Yukime turns toward the Crimson Tower, and Shadow vanishes from sight.

The Watchdog is waiting for prey outside the Crimson Tower.

He sits on the ground, cradling his gaunt body with a warped smile stiff upon his face.

Once, he was the killer—no, the knight—known as the White Demon.

Back in his country, he'd served as a knight captain. With his white hair fluttering over his white uniform, he'd cast the image of an ideal defender of the peace.

However, his true nature was that of a bloodthirsty serial killer who stalked the streets at night. Ever since he was born, he'd taken joy in killing people. The red blood, the screams, the looks of desperation on their faces… Killing others made him feel alive.

One day, though, one of his colleagues caught him in the act. In that moment, he became the White Demon.

In the space of a single night, the White Demon slew his entire knight order before fleeing. Then, once he escaped, he kept on killing, eventually making his way to the Lawless City.

He knew no fear. He thought he stood at the very top of the food chain.

However, when he challenged the Crimson Tower, his misconceptions were shattered. The White Demon had struck fear into countless hearts, but he was unable to lay so much as a finger on Crimson. He was unilaterally defeated and ended up having to plea for his life.

Now, he works as a Watchdog.

The freedom to kill was stolen from him.

Killing had given his life purpose, and he'd lost even that…

Now, an opportunity was finally approaching him.

"Hee-hee…"

When the Red Moon started, most of the vampires had left the tower.

That meant there was no one left to judge him. As long as the Red Moon continued, he could kill as he pleased.

And so, the White Demon waits for prey. He's the Watchdog no more—he's the White Demon, and he's waiting for people to slaughter.

Rumor has it that the Dark Knight Association is planning on assassinating the Blood Queen. As the White Demon waits for his target, he practically prays that someone will come by.

And then—

Violent footsteps rumble through the streets, and his fervent wish is granted.

"Hee-hee…hee?"

The White Demon looks up in ecstasy to see a tanned behemoth.

The man's body is covered in thick, veiny muscles, and he's carrying a billhook longer than he is tall.

The man glares at the White Demon with a stern glint in his eye. He practically exudes violence. The White Demon is certain of it—this is Juggernaut the Tyrant, one of the Lawless City's rulers.

"You're in the way. Move."

"Hee…" The White Demon instantly averts his gaze and steps away from the door.

He knows full well that there are people who are stronger than him, and he knows he absolutely can't lay a hand on the Lawless City's rulers or their inner circles. He learned that the hard way—from fighting Crimson.

"Annoying."

The Tyrant stops in front of the door, then swings his colossal billhook and smashes it to smithereens.

"Hee?!" The White Demon shrinks back to let the Tyrant pass and looks at the pulverized door.

It had been thick, not to mention reinforced with iron. Even a dark knight would have had trouble getting through it. The man who obliterated it in a single blow enters the Crimson Tower.

The White Demon is terrified at the thought of what might be starting.

Then he hears footsteps from behind.

They're reserved and light, so they clearly belong to a woman. He likes women. Their flesh is so tender.

A wicked grin spreads across his face as he turns around.

There, he finds a woman so bewitching and fair, she seems almost unworldly.

Her hair is lustrous and white, and it's adorned with a pair of fox ears. Two iron fans hang from her kimono's sash.

That's all well and good.

However, the problem is the nine fox tails swaying behind her.

"Hee?!"

There's no mistaking it. The woman is Yukime the Spirit Fox, one of the Lawless City's other rulers.

"Move."

"Hee-hee!"

The White Demon shuffles to the side before she even finishes her sentence. She's way, way out of his league. He cowers behind a corner as the Spirit Fox passes him by and enters the tower, then he looks up.

Is the tower going to survive, now that the Tyrant and the Spirit Fox are inside? Are those monsters going to have an all-out war?

Then he hears footsteps once more.

Upon hearing them click, the White Demon grins.

The Tyrant and the Spirit Fox are already inside, so there's no way someone of their caliber can possibly show up.

Sure enough, who he finds is just some guy in black he's never seen before.

The man's wearing a jet-black longcoat, and his face is covered beneath a hood and behind a mask.

However, it's impossible to get a read on the man's strength. When someone is as strong as the White Demon, he can usually tell how powerful his foe is before the fight even starts. However, he's drawing a complete blank on the man in the longcoat.

Still, compared with the Tyrant and the Spirit Fox, he's probably an easy target.

This is the prey I've been waiting for.

"…Hee-hee!!"

The moment the man in black enters his range, the White Demon strikes.

Got him.

As soon as that thought passes through his head, the White Demon finds himself looking up at the sky.

"Hee…?"

Unable to tell what's going on, he glances around, only to find that his bottom half is still standing.

It's been separated from his top half, and it gushes blood as it topples to the ground.

That's when the White Demon finally realizes he's been cut in two.

"Hee… Hee…"

He assumes the man in black will just head into the Crimson Tower after having sliced him in twain, but instead, he plants his foot on the outside of the tower and begins running straight up its side.

"Hee?!"

As the blood pumps out of his body, the White Demon can't believe his eyes.

But the man in black isn't done yet. Halfway up, he comes to an abrupt stop, smashes open the wall with his fist, and slips into the hole.

The man is insane.

He's clearly far more dangerous than the other two…

The White Demon now realizes that he's laid a hand on someone he absolutely wasn't supposed to.

"Hee… Hee…"

The moment before the life fades from his body, he recalls something. "Wait, isn't that where they keep the treasure?"

Thump, thump, thump. Hearing a low thud, Beta glances up from her book.

When she looks around the spacious library, she sees that one part of the wall is vibrating in concert with the noise.

Is someone hitting the wall from outside?

Right as the thought crosses her mind, the wall suddenly gives way, and a pair of women come tumbling through, accompanied by a fair bit of dirt.

"Ow?!"

"Oof."

The dark-haired girl lands on the ground face-first, and the red-haired girl collapses on top of her.

"Owww… I wasn't expecting the wall to be so brittle."

When the dark-haired girl looks up with her hands clamped on her nose, Beta realizes that she knows her. It's Claire Kagenou, her master's sister.

"I told you to be careful…," her attractive redheaded companion notes emotionlessly.

"If we'd taken it slower, we might not have made it in time. Also, Mary, would you mind getting off me?"

"Oh, sorry, Claire."

After the redhead does as requested, the two of them stand up and dust off their clothes.

"By the way, where exactly are we?"

"We should be right under the Crimson Tower, but…"

Beta chooses to answer their questions. "You're in the Crimson Tower's underground library."

That's when they finally notice her sitting on her chair.

"…Well, *they* found us fast."

"That's why I told you to be careful…"

"Look, I'm sorry. But it looks like we'd have been found out one way or the other."

The two of them draw their swords and square off against Beta.

Beta sighs and closes her book.

"Good grief… I never expected someone to come popping out of the wall. Now, I *should* get rid of the witnesses…" Beta sneaks a glance at Claire as she mutters. "But it looks like that isn't an option. Nobody lay a hand on them."

Although she quietly gives some orders, all appearances suggest that the three of them are alone.

"I have no intention of fighting you. Would you be so kind as to put away your sword, Ms. Claire?"

"…! You know me?"

"You're Claire Kagenou, the winner of the Bushin Festival."

"I guess my name's gotten around. Fair enough. Tell me who you are and what you want. Once I'm sure you aren't my enemy, we'd be happy to back down."

"Wait, Claire…"

"We don't have time to be fighting unnecessary battles. She doesn't look like she's on the Blood Queen's side, and…she looks like a tough opponent." Claire's gaze sharpens as she speaks.

Beta looks like she's just casually sitting there, but the air about her suggests she won't go down easily.

"Agreed."

Beta's wearing a black bodysuit and mask, and she certainly doesn't look like one of the Blood Queen's supporters. If anything, she's probably an intruder like Claire.

"Who I am and what I want, huh…? Well, you're right. Just like you, I'm here to invade the Crimson Tower."

"I need more details."

"I'm afraid that would take a while."

"Give me the specifics, but make it concise."

"My, how particular." Beta shrugs. "My name is Beta, and I work for the Shadow Garden. I came to the Crimson Tower because I have some business to attend to."

"Is that so. And what exactly is the mysterious Shadow Garden doing here?"

"Hmm… How much to tell you? There are things I'm allowed to say and thing I'm not, after all. How about this…? We're conducting research on possession for certain reasons, and we wanted a blood sample from a Progenitor."

"On the possession…?!"

"Why do you need a Progenitor's blood…?"

Claire reacts to the possession bit, whereas Mary responds to the mention of Progenitor's blood.

"Over the course of our research, we arrived at a certain hypothesis. There's a possibility that the blood of the possessed and the blood of the Progenitors share the same origin and that the two merely diverged as they were inherited from parent to child."

"You dare blaspheme against the Progenitors…?" A harsh look crosses Mary's eyes, and she tightens her grip on her sword.

"It's only a theory, and we certainly mean no insult to the Progenitors. We just wanted a sample so we could check for ourselves. I do find one thing puzzling, though. Why does the thought make you so mad, Ms. Ancient Vampire Hunter?"

"—?! You know who I am, too, it seems…"

"I've heard rumors."

"I see… Then you know not to get in my way."

"Oh, I wouldn't dream of it."

Mary glares at Beta as she stows her sword. Beta shrugs, then reopens her book.

"Vampires live long lives, and the quality of their libraries certainly reflect that. There are all sorts of valuable documents here. Are you satisfied now, Ms. Claire?" she asks as she goes back to reading.

Claire glances between Mary and Beta, thinking.

“There’s one more thing I want to know.” She stares straight at Beta, her expression grave.

Sensing Claire’s pointed gaze, Beta looks up. “If it’s something I’m allowed to answer.”

“Is there a way to cure the possessed?”

Beta doesn’t answer right away. She stares at Claire for a little while, clearly deep in thought.

“I’m…afraid I can’t tell you. However, I will say you personally don’t have anything to worry about.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Exactly what I said.” Beta turns the page in her book, clearly not intending to say any more.

Claire quietly clicks her tongue, then turns around. “Let’s go.”

Before she and Mary can leave the library, Beta calls out to them.

“Wait. Ms. Claire, would you be willing to tell me why you teamed up with the Ancient Vampire Hunter to come to the Crimson Tower?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Idle curiosity, nothing more.”

Claire frowns as she answers. “The Blood Queen kidnapped Cid, my kid brother. If I don’t hurry, he’s going to be used as a human sacrifice.”

“Your younger brother is…?” Beta tilts her head to the side.

“Is that true?!”

Suddenly, a fourth voice calls out in a library occupied by three people.

When they look toward where the voice came from, another woman stands there seemingly having appeared out of thin air. She’s wearing a black bodysuit, and her face is hidden behind a mask.

“Number 666, restrain yourself.”

“But I… I’m sorry…”

Although she looks like she wants to dash off this very moment, Number 666 pulls herself together and steps back with her head hung.

“Is that all? If so, we’re leaving.” Claire reaches toward the library door.

“One last thing. Is there really no way you can try to re-create the Haven…?”

Claire turns around. “What does that mean?”

But Beta isn’t looking at her. She’s staring straight at Mary.

“Hey, wait—”

Mary looks away and wordlessly leaves the library. Claire hurries after her.

For a little while, the library is quiet again. The only noise is the sound of pages turning.

“Number 666, I’m disappointed in you,” says Beta as she reads.

“My deepest apologies…” Number 666 bows her head in contrition.

“Lambda spoke highly of your skills, and Alpha has great expectations for you. But this is a mark against you. Also, you two should have stopped her.”

“My apologies.”

“Sooorry.”

Two more women appear behind Number 666.

“This is Number 666’s first field exercise. Number 664, as her squad leader, this is your responsibility.”

“Understood…”

“We’ll need to be more careful going forward. To be absolutely clear, our mission is to recover a sample of Progenitor blood for the lab. However, Master Shadow said he’d handle the Blood Queen, so we have to make sure we don’t act carelessly. Until he arrives, our job is to continue surveying the materials in the library and collecting anything important. Now, get back to work.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

As ordered, the other three quickly get back to the tasks at hand.

As Mary expected, there are almost no vampires left in the Crimson Tower.

That said, there are still some, and every now and again, the two of them find themselves under attack.

Claire swings her sword and slices through a vampire’s neck. However, its body still moves.

“Stab them through the heart!”

Following Mary’s instructions, Claire impales the headless vampire’s heart. When she does, thin red fissures of light spread from it, and soon nothing but ashes remain.

Behind Claire, Mary takes down their final foe.

It’s thanks to her help that the two of them have made it through all the attacks unscathed.

Although she has less raw magic at her disposal than Claire, her mastery with the sword is downright impressive. And more important, she’s used to fighting vampires.

Most vampires rely on their physical strength in battle, and it’s easy to imagine how difficult it would be to go up against an opponent with such superhuman movements and astounding regenerative skills in a fair fight.

However, Mary seems to practically know what the vampires are going to do before they do it, and her responses are swift and precise.

Having her help is going to be essential in rescuing Cid. Claire knows that full well.

Yet even so—she just can’t help but say something.

“Are you hiding something from me?” she asks as Mary stares somberly at the last remaining pile of ash.

“What do you mean, ‘something’…?” Mary replies, her face unreadable.

“You were acting strangely back at the library. It was like you were on the vampires’ side. Weren’t you here to hunt the Blood Queen?”

“I am.”

“Really? Then I have to ask: How do you know so much about vampires? I can tell by watching you fight them. You know how they think. You understand them better than anyone.”

“It’s because I’ve dedicated my entire life to hunting down the Blood Queen…”

“And I’m saying that isn’t enough to explain it. What was up with that last exchange back at the library, then? What’s the Haven? What’s this about you re-creating it?”

With each sentence, Claire’s tone grows harsher.

However, Mary offers her no answers.

“You can’t just play dumb,” Claire comments.

“Well, you’re no different.”

“Huh?”

“You have things you’re keeping from me, too. Why is it you’re so obsessed with the possession?”

“I…”

“Everyone knows there’s no way to heal it.”

“…I suppose not.” Claire bites her lip.

“Everyone has their secrets. Don’t they?”

“…Maybe we should both just stop asking questions. I’ll help you take down the Blood Queen; you help me save my brother.”

“Sounds good to me…”

Neither meets the other’s eyes as they resume their ascent.

“Wait.”

A little while later, Mary, who’s walking ahead, stops in her tracks.

“What’s wrong?”

“I can hear someone fighting up ahead.”

The two tread silently as they draw closer to the noise. It sounds like there’s a battle taking place on the other side of the door. However, there aren’t any other routes they can take.

“Looks like we don’t have a choice…”

“Try opening it a tiny bit and peeking inside.”

Mary gives Claire’s suggestion a nod, then peers through the doorway.

Inside, there appears to be a sizable hall. The scarlet moon floats in the sky outside a large window.

A tanned goliath is holding a vampire by the throat and grinning.

“Y’all are weak…”

The man's massive billhook is stained with blood, and he's surrounded by ghoul chunks and piles of ash.

"And you're part of the top brass round these parts, too. I recognize your face. Now, where's Crimson?" The man wrings the vampire's neck as he asks his question.

"Wh-who can say…?"

"What? You ain't gonna talk?"

"No… I…don't need to…"

The moment the words leave the vampire's mouth, his body transforms into a cloud of red mist. It's Mistform, an ability that only the strongest vampires can use.

"Oh?" The tanned man's hand snatches at the empty air, and the red fog gathers behind him.

The vampire's hand emerges from the mist, and his sharp claws bear down on the man.

However, the tanned man doesn't so much as look back.

"My instinct's always right…"

He just casually swings his colossal weapon.

A terrifying gust of wind blows all the way to the door, and Mary and Claire have to frantically push on it to keep it closed.

When they peek back inside, they see the vampire's flesh scattered across the ground like mincemeat. The chunks quickly turn to ash.

"Who's that guy?" Claire whispers.

He certainly doesn't look like a vampire, but it's hard to see him as an ally, either.

"He's Juggernaut the Tyrant, one of the Lawless City's three rulers. We should try to avoid fighting him. That vampire he just killed was the third strongest among the Blood Queen's inner circle…"

"That guy was the third strongest…?"

Given the absurd gulf in power between him and the Tyrant, it certainly didn't looked that way.

"Let's just stay hidden…"

Claire nods, agreeing with Mary's suggestion.

However, the Tyrant calls out from the other side of the door, "My instinct's always right… Someone's there, ain'tcha?"

"—Gh!"

Suddenly, the door splinters.

As the billhook comes cleaving horizontally through from the other side, Mary and Claire throw themselves to the ground. The sound of violence booms out from above them.

"What, two little girls?"

The Tyrant gazes down at the two of them from beyond the smashed door.

"Well, this is bad."

"Looks like we're out of options."

They draw their swords, and the Tyrant laughs.

“Y’all don’t look like vampires, but…hey, it’s your funeral.”

He brings the colossal billhook crashing down.

They each evade the blow by dodging to a different side. The weapon smashes into the ground, sending rubble flying into the air.

The Tyrant casts a sharp glare at his targets from within the storm of debris then aims for Claire, the closer of the two.

He takes a massive step forward and, with a swing of his thick arms, brings his billhook to bear.

However, Claire can see through his movements.

Although the Tyrant is blessed with both speed and power, his peculiar weapon necessitates sweeping motions. He may be fast, but Claire can read him like a book.

Sure enough, she blocks his attack with her blade.

That said, the impact from the blow vastly exceeds her expectations. Her expression twists, and her follow-up is a moment too slow.

A moment is all the Tyrant needs.

“All you swordfolk use the same damn playbook…!”

At some point, he started holding his billhook in one hand.

His other hand, now free, sinks into Claire’s face.

“Claire!!”

Mary moves to cover for Claire, but the Tyrant stops her in her tracks with a single look. She knows that any wrong moves on her part will mean death.

Although she was blasted away and sent rolling across the ground, Claire gets up as if nothing happened.

She spits out a mouthful of blood.

“Ow. Now the inside of my mouth is all cut up…” She glares at the Tyrant.

The Tyrant, in turn, raises one eyebrow and grins. For some reason, there’s a shallow cut across his chest.

“Y’know, that one blow’s enough to take most people down for the count. This ain’t your first rodeo, is it?”

“I have a brother, so yeah.”

Blood streams from Claire’s mouth as she beams a bright-red smile.

The moment the Tyrant punched her, she not only leaned into the blow, but got a decent slash at his chest, too. She gives her sword a practice swing as though to test it out, then hawks out another mouthful of blood.

“You’re a man of violence, I see. All strength, no skill.”

She’s putting up a brave front, but she’s not nearly as composed as her words are letting on. The cuts in her mouth are deep and bloody, and her head is still ringing from the hit.

Trading blows with him was a mistake. His are far heavier than hers.

“You got me. I never learned no technique…’cause I never needed to!”

He charges at Claire.

The Tyrant's power comes from his raw physical strength, his innate magic, and his insane combat intuition. He has no need for skill. If anything, it would only slow him down.

Claire goes for another block on the full-force slash.

This time, though, the blow breaks her posture.

Her footing is shaky. The damage to her head still lingers.

"—!!"

The Tyrant isn't one to let an opportunity pass.

He holds his gigantic billhook overhead…

"I told you. My instinct's always right…"

…and swings it hard.

The blow goes wide, swinging past Claire at an alarming speed.

A large spray of blood hits her in the face.

"…Huh?"

She's unharmed.

When she looks to the side, though, she sees Mary with her stomach rent open.

It's practically caved in.

Mary coughs up blood as she kneels.

"M-Mary!!"

"All you swordfolk really do use the same damn playbook. She was waitin' for me to drop my guard the whole time, and I was waitin' for her to come kill me… Them's the breaks."

The Tyrant flashes an evil smile.

As Mary kneels lifelessly, Claire rushes over to her with tears in her eyes.

"Mary… No! This can't be…"

The wound reaches her organs. It's fatal.

Claire puts her hands on the wound and runs magic through it.

When she does, though, Mary grabs them.

"*Cough!* Your blood…*cough*…"

Mary looks at Claire, who is trying to tell her something as she coughs up blood.

"Mary! You shouldn't move…!"

Mary just grabs Claire's hands tighter as she tries to get her message across. "Claire…please…let me suck…your blood…"

"Wait, suck…?"

Suddenly, Mary plants her lips on Claire's.

"Hmm-hmph?!" Claire's eyes go wide with shock.

Mary sucks on Claire's lips, slurping up the blood dripping off them.

Her eyes flash red.

"What are you—?!"

Claire tries to pull Mary off her. But Mary isn't there anymore.

"Huh?!"

"Gah!!"

Claire’s surprised yelp and the Tyrant’s scream of pain come at the same time. She whirls around to find the Tyrant looking up with his arm sliced to ribbons.

“What’s up there…? Wait! Mary?!”

Mary is floating in the air. Her eyes are glowing red, and sharp canines are sticking out of her mouth.

Furthermore, the wound on her chest has completely closed up.

“So that’s what’s going on… Interesting!” The Tyrant laughs like a carnivore, and Mary offers him a sad smile.

The Tyrant’s billhook and Mary’s sword collide.

Their strength is—*evenly matched*. No, the Tyrant is coming out slightly ahead.

“You ain’t bad…!”

“—!!”

Sparks fly as they battle.

“But I’m better,” he snarls.

Then Mary gets blasted away. Debris goes flying in the billhook’s wake.

“Mary!!”

She crashes into the wall, then crumples to her knees.

“Rgh… I’m not used…to the blood yet…”

“It’s over.”

As Claire is distracted by Mary, the Tyrant appears before her and raises his billhook high.

She can’t defend herself in time.

“Cid… Forgive me…”

In her final moments, the only thing Claire thinks of is her brother.

But then—

“…The time of awakening is nigh.”

A man wearing a jet-black longcoat swoops in between Claire and the Tyrant.

“Hey!! The hell’s your problem?!”

“…You’re in my way.” The man blocks the billhook, then launches a casual upward kick.

Casual as it is, though, it’s also unbelievably fast.

The blow sends the Tyrant flying. He smashes through the wall hard, coughing up blood as he goes.

Unfortunately for him, the wall leads outside.

With nowhere left to stand, he enters a free fall.

As he does, his screams fade into the distance. “SHADOW! YOU BASTAAAAAAAAAAAAARD…!!”

Claire looks up at the figure’s back. “You’re…Shadow…”

Under normal circumstances, his overwhelming power might have caused her to put her guard up.

But now, for whatever reason, seeing him sets her heart at ease.

Why is he inspiring such emotions in her, even though they’ve never met before? Claire doesn’t know.

She can’t tear her eyes off him.

“There isn’t much time left…”

Suddenly, he vanishes.

“Ah…”

It’s like he was never even there.

“Shadow…”

A faint glimmer of loneliness remains in Claire’s chest.

“That was Shadow…? Did he save us?” asks Mary as she gets back on her feet.

“I think so…”

“He took out the Tyrant in just one hit…”

“Mary, are you okay?”

“Probably… Sorry about that, Claire. For sucking your blood out of the blue.”

“Oh, that’s water under the bridge, but… Mary, is the thing you were hiding from me—?”

“Yeah, I’m a vampire…”

“Huh…”

“I’ll tell you everything: who I am, my motives, and the truth behind the Blood Queen…”

And with sadness in her eyes, Mary begins her tale.

Mary was once a follower of Elisabeth the Blood Queen.

This was back in the era when vampires ruled the night. At the time, Elisabeth held great power, even for a Progenitor.

Vampires hunted and killed humans practically for sport. Most of them saw humans as base livestock, and there were even some countries where they reigned over them wholesale.

For the vampires, it was their golden age.

Elisabeth, however, couldn’t stand the idea of hunting more humans than was necessary.

Because of that, she hunted only the bare minimum she needed to survive, refusing to take their lives in excess. There was no shortage of vampires who opposed her methods, so despite her power, her followers numbered few.

Soon, though, the vampires entered their dark age.

The humans began hunting the vampires back, turning the vampires’ era into one of nightmares. The destruction of the vampires’ capital sparked the fire of rebellion, and the vampires’ numbers dwindled in the blink of an eye.

At the time, Elisabeth and her followers ruled a small human country. They plowed the fields right alongside the humans, fought off monsters together, and protected their borders.

Vampires didn’t look down on humans in her lands, nor did humans fear vampires. The way they maintained that relationship was by not drinking blood.

Without drinking human blood, vampires can’t go on living.

That was the prevailing belief at the time, but by abstaining herself, Elisabeth disproved this theory.

Progenitors’ compulsion to drink blood is dozens of times stronger than that of normal vampires. The pain she endured must have been unimaginable. But she successfully went cold turkey through agony comparable to lopping her own arm off. Upon seeing her resolve, her followers did the same.

Without drinking blood, the vampires gradually lost their powers, eventually becoming no stronger than humans.

However, there were things that they gained, too.

For one, they gained the power to stay out in the sun. By giving up blood, they became able to live in the same beautiful, sunlit world as humans.

They also gained tranquility in their hearts. By abstaining from blood and living their lives basking in the sun’s rays, their urge to drink gradually subsided. Eventually, their dispositions were no different from humans.

Despite all that, Elisabeth the Progenitor’s powers were as great as ever.

Her skin would become inflamed when exposed to the light, so she couldn’t go outside without a thick black parasol. The only reason it didn’t instantly turn her to ash was because most Progenitors had a certain degree of resistance to sunlight in the first place.

Also, no matter how long she went without blood, her maddening urges never ceased.

Yet despite her agony, she carried out her life beneath her parasol just the same as all the others. Eventually, she gathered up her followers and spoke to them.

“Let us build a Haven here. A land where humans and vampires can live in peace…”

And by taking in and protecting vampires being pursued by humanity, her followers’ ranks grew.

Of course, the condition for her protection was that they give up blood.

Some of them resented her for this and revolted against her. It was with a heavy heart that she had to exile them. Some refused to comply, and those she put down herself.

At some point, all the vampires in the world came under human attack, and they all gathered under Elisabeth’s banner.

Her population expanded, humans and vampires mingled together, and her land prospered. She used her great powers to defend her lands, so vampire hunters dared not enter.

The Haven she’d set out to create was a success.

She prayed everyone would be able to continue living in peace.

However, all it took was a single night for the Haven to fall.

It was the night the Red Moon rose in the sky.

Elisabeth’s urge to drink grew ever stronger, so she was forced to lock herself away in her castle.

Back then, Mary was her second-in-command, and Crimson was her third.

The two of them took turns bringing her meals, but when it was Crimson’s turn, tragedy struck.

Crimson mixed human blood into Elisabeth’s food.

If she’d been at her best, she might have noticed its scent before she ate it. Or maybe she would have eaten it but still been able to withstand her urges.

But that was the day of the Red Moon.

She had been without blood for too long, and she wasn’t able to stop herself from going on a rampage. Crimson and his followers rose up in unison.

Between the rampaging Elisabeth and Crimson and his men, it took them only a few hours to slaughter every human in the country.

The vampires had seen humanity as mere livestock. There was no way they could live side by side with them.

Elisabeth’s dream, the Haven, had all been a mere fantasy.

Because Elisabeth’s followers had stopped drinking blood, they were powerless to resist, and they were slain as they fled.

Mary was the sole survivor.

In order to stop Elisabeth, she lapped up the blood of the dead. Then she pursued Elisabeth and the others all the way out of the country.

Their fervor knew no bounds, and before the day was out, Elisabeth had destroyed yet another small country and torn its king limb from limb.

Mary hadn’t made it in time.

Elisabeth’s rampage lasted a full three days, and in that time, she dealt catastrophic blows to another three countries.

Mary found Elisabeth the night after it was all over.

Elisabeth was weeping as she gazed out on the countries she’d ravaged.

“Please, cast my ashes into the sea so I can never rise again and repeat this mistake…,” she begged, then drove her sword into her own heart.

She should have turned to ash.

But she didn’t. Her blade missed the vitals ever so slightly.

Her heart stopped, and her lungs no longer breathed.

It was like she was dead.

Except she wasn’t.

If Mary placed human blood in her mouth, she would instantly be resuscitated.

Alternatively, if she gave the sword a small push, Elisabeth would instantly turn to ash.

Mary couldn’t do either.

She couldn’t go against her master’s will, but she couldn’t bring herself to kill her, either. Instead, she hid her eternally slumbering queen in a coffin and vowed to protect her until the end of days.

“It was a foolish decision. A few years after that, Crimson snatched Queen Elisabeth away. Because I refused to drink blood, I wasn’t powerful enough to protect her. Now, he’s planning on using her again. I don’t know how I could face her if I let the tragedy of a thousand years ago play out once more…” Mary smiles sadly. “But that’s everything. I’m not human. I’m a vampire. And I’m sorry for keeping that from you…”

“It’s fine. I’m no different. See, I might be one of the possessed. A few years ago, these black bruises appeared on my back, and they just wouldn’t stop spreading. But when I looked in the mirror one day, they were just gone. *Poof.* If those black bruises were the mark of the possessed, then eventually, I’ll become a monster… That’s why I forced my brother to come here with me. I wanted to get him into the Knight Order while I still can. But the moment I looked away, the enemy snatched him… I don’t know how I’ll be able to face him if anything happens to him…”

“Ah…”

The two of them are silent for a bit.

“I find it hard to believe that the Haven was really all a fantasy. Can’t you just try again?”

Claire doesn’t think Elisabeth was wrong. If she can, she wants to save her.

Mary shakes her head. “I don’t want to make the same mistake again.”

“I see… Well, if you’re not going to save her, I will. If we kidnap her and wait for the Red Moon to end, she shouldn’t go on a rampage.”

“But Claire…why go to such lengths?”

“Once this is over, we can wake her up. Then you two can talk it over.”

“But…I’m certain Queen Elisabeth just wants to die.” Mary looks down in thought. All sorts of conflicts are welling up inside her.

“You won’t know that till you ask. And it’d be too sad for things to just end like this. You’d be sad, Elisabeth would be sad, and all those dead people would be sad…”

Claire looks Mary in the eye and smiles.

Mary’s eyes are filled with hesitation. Deep down, she doesn’t want things to end like this, either.

“Your Haven wasn’t just some fantasy. That’s what I believe anyway. Let’s try and find an ending that has everyone smiling.”

“I’m sorry…for putting such a burden on you.” Mary looks back up and nods.

“Don’t worry about it. Now, let’s go beat up Crimson and kidnap your sleeping queen.”

“Sounds good. And we’ll make sure to save your brother, too.”

Claire stops in her tracks. “*I’m* going to be the one to save Cid. Don’t butt in.”

“Uh, okay…”

“You just back me up while I perform my beautiful, gallant rescue.”

“…Understood.”

With that, the two of them resume their ascent.

The Eminence in Shadow

onestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as
g as I can remember.
s it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
stermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
aracters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role
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affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
I wanted to be one of them.
Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

Pursuing the Blood Queen!

The Eminence in Shadow
Volume 3

Chapter 3

Chapter 3

Pursuing the Blood Queen!

Man, Progenitors don't screw around when it comes to treasure.

I've never seen literal mountains of gold before. My heart's all aflutter.

I'm like a kid in a candy shop. I want some of this… I gotta get my hands on these… But as I rummage through the treasure, I suddenly remember there's only so much I can carry.

Artwork is out for obvious reasons, so I'm gonna give all the cultured stuff a pass. Unfortunately, to my dismay, artwork seems to be the most plentiful thing here.

Next up are jewels and precious metals. The small stuff is fine, but the larger ones are too bulky and unwieldy.

Looks like I need to narrow my focus.

I gotta go with the most efficient, most reliable source of money out there—gold coins.

They're as small as a five-hundred-yen piece, but each one is worth a hundred thousand *zeni*. And better yet, you can spend them as is without even needing to convert them or anything.

When it comes to efficiency and reliability, they blow everything else in this treasury out of the water.

It's kinda sad, honestly, seeing all this treasure I can't have.

"Well, that's life for you…," I mutter as I bid farewell to the myriad other riches and start shoveling up handfuls of gold coins.

Now, I'm not an idiot. I thought this out ahead of time.

Taking a page from Epsilon's book—the undisputed expert when it comes to slime bodysuits—I embed the coins within my suit.

Epsilon padded her body out with slime, and I'm doing the same with gold.

Every inch of my bodysuit, longcoat, and hood is stuffed to the brim.

Okay, that's not totally true. I left some room by the joints.

Even so, I manage to fit over a thousand of the little buggers onto my person.

A thousand gold coins comes out to a hundred million *zeni*. The math checks out.

I'm planning on living to the ripe old age of three hundred, so it's nowhere near enough. That said, it'd be pretty risky to try and bring any more gold than that with me.

If I use magic to strengthen myself, carrying around a thousand coins isn't a problem or anything, but it still makes it kinda hard to move. My movements are a little stiff now, but they'd be miles worse if I tried to pack on any more.

Also, a thousand coins aren't really visible from the outside, but if I went for double that, I'd start sticking out like a sore thumb.

"I'd be fine if all I had to do was carry them out…"

…but I've got a boss battle with the Blood Queen waiting for me after this.

Supposedly, she's some sort of Progenitor Vampire.

She's gonna be strong as hell, I'm sure of it.

After all, Progenitor Vampires are *supposed* to be strong. That's just how these things work.

To prepare for the occasion, I've already got my battle plan all laid out.

Up until now, I've been using the setup where I always show up at the twelfth hour, but given that the enemy this time is a Progenitor Vampire big shot, I thought I'd try mixing things up and being the first to get to her this time.

That way, we can do the scene where the protagonists show up in the middle of our fight and go, "What's with that crazy battle going on over there?! Stay back!"

Love that.

For that to happen, I need to be the one who finds the Blood Queen first. If I spend too much time dawdling here, someone's gonna beat me to the punch.

For now, I'm just gonna pile the coins up by the treasury's entrance.

"I'll come pick you guys up later."

This way, I'll be able to nab them quickly even if something unexpected happens.

Praying I'll be able to retrieve them successfully, I flex my muscles for the first time in a while and dash up the tower at full speed.

Midway up, I spy my sister. She seems to be in a tough spot, so I save her by sending the Tyrant flying.

Now then, gotta hurry.

"At long last, the time is finally here…"

A graceful smile spreads across Crimson's face.

The sacrifice has been prepared, and the moon is waxing scarlet.

The time to revive Elisabeth the Blood Queen is finally upon him.

Crimson grabs the lid to the coffin enshrined in the center of the room and opens it up.

Its contents come into full view.

Inside is a small, shriveled-up black lump.

Crimson carefully swaddles the hunk with his fingers and lifts it into the air.

“It’s been too long, my Blood Queen… Everything is in place for you to bathe the world in blood…”

Upon closer inspection, the black lump is recognizable as an organ. Specifically, a shriveled-up heart.

After a thousand years, it’s all that’s left of the Progenitor.

As long as it remains, though, she can still be resuscitated. That’s just how Progenitors are.

Crimson closes the coffin and carries the heart to the raven-haired sacrifice. He gouged out the boy’s heart earlier, and he now fits the Blood Queen’s in its place.

Fresh blood. Fresh flesh. That’s all the Blood Queen, the mightiest of the Progenitors, needs to rise anew and begin her reign of terror once more.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh…”

It’ll take a little longer for the revival to begin.

Crimson knows he needs to leave for some time. The Blood Queen will be starving when she comes to, and she’ll attack man and vampire alike. He won’t be able to get closer until she settles down a bit.

He walks briskly to the door, opens it, and steps outside.

Suddenly, he freezes in his tracks.

“A-and who do you think you are…?”

He hadn’t sensed anyone out in the hallway. When he opened the door, there shouldn’t have been anyone there.

Out of nowhere, a man dressed in a black longcoat appears before him.

Crimson immediately extends his claws and prepares himself for battle.

“Begone now. Lest your life is for— Gluh?!”

Crimson’s body splits in two.

He’s been cleanly bisected from head to crotch.

He hadn’t even been able to follow the ebony sword’s swing with his eyes.

His eyes go wide in shock as he quickly regenerates.

Crimson is a powerful vampire in his own right. He can shrug off a bisection or two, easy.

“Who are you?! How dare you lay that *vulgar* blade of yours on m— Bluh?!”

In the middle of his sentence, his head goes flying.

Even though he was on high alert, he still couldn’t see the man’s movements.

“I—I say! I’m starting to get ang— Hruh?!”

This time, his arms are sent into the air.

“You fool! Under the Red Moon, vampires are un— Chuh?!”

His legs get the same treatment, instantly carved into pieces. Then his torso gets sliced like salami.

“Wh-what?! My regeneration can’t keep up wi— Fluh?!”

The regenerating parts of his body immediately get chopped off and minced.

“W-wait! Wait just one moment!! What are you after?! We can talk this o — Mruh?!”

Next, his neckless head gets diced up.

“Impossible… This can’t be happening…”

Afterward, all that’s left is his heart. It, too, gets stabbed.

Crimson crumbles to ash.

The man in the longcoat then enters the room and stops in front of the large coffin.

“My name is Shadow. I lurk in the darkness and hunt down shadows…”

He waits for a moment.

On standby.

Waiting…

“Blood Queen… I know you’re in there…”

And still he waits.

He stays in place…!!

“…You’re there, right? I don’t sense anyone, but you’re just concealing your presence, right?” Shadow opens the coffin and peers inside.

There’s no one there.

“Huh? Wait, seriously? What kind of cliché is this?”

He looks around the room and spots the corpse of a dark-haired young man with a hole in his chest.

“*You* aren’t the Queen, are you? Nah, you’re a guy, and dead to boot…”

He tilts his head to the side and looks at the pile of ash by the door.

“Was *that* vampire the Queen? He *did* have red hair… No, no, there’s no way it’s a dude, right? He did seem kinda like a boss, though… Buuuut he was way too weak for that…”

He ponders for a moment.

“Is this one of those weird scenarios where the Queen is missing…? Maybe it’s the thing where she never even existed in the first place, or the one where she’s already been killed, or the one where she’s out and about… Anyways, let’s go pick up the coins, then I can go looking for her…”

He turns around and walks out.

“Sigh… I hope I didn’t get here too late… I came here as fast as I could… Maaan…,” he mutters as he disappears.

The crimson moon casts its fantastical light over the now-empty room.

Suddenly, the sacrifice’s body twitches.

Thump, thump.

The heart embedded in his chest begins beating.

Mary and Claire reach the top of the Crimson Tower and open the door.

“Cid?!”

Seeing a young man with dark hair toppled over and bleeding from the chest, Claire rushes over to him.

She wraps him in a tight embrace. Tears gush out of her ruby eyes.

“No!! Please, Cid, wake up!! Cid?! Cid? …Huh?”

Claire quickly snaps to her senses as she looks at the corpse.

Her tears dry up.

“This isn’t Cid.”

“Really? It isn’t?”

“Cid? Cid, where are you?”

Claire’s eyes dart around the room.

Then Mary shouts.

“—Claire?!”

“…Huh?”

It all happens in a flash.

By the time she’s noticed, the boy’s arm has already pierced her stomach.

Blood dribbles from Claire’s mouth.

“Gluh…What’s…happening…Cid…”

“Claire!!”

Claire crumples to the ground.

The boy, still bleeding from the chest, begins moving.

He was definitely dead a moment ago.

Now, though, he rises to his feet. Red feelers come pouring out of his chest. They wriggle and squirm ominously as they engulf his body.

“Oh no… No, it can’t be…”

Mary knows this aura.

The red feelers cover the boy’s body completely, then suddenly burst outward.

And when they do…

…a beautiful, naked girl appears from within the spray of blood.

Her hair is a deep crimson, as are her eyes. Her skin, on the other hand, is pale, and her proportions are nearly perfect and feminine. She looks exactly like the Elisabeth that Mary remembers.

Elisabeth embraces the impaled Claire, then sinks her fangs into the girl’s neck.

Claire’s voice dribbles from her mouth. “Ah, ah…”

She’s still alive.

However, all Mary can do is watch as Claire has her blood sucked.

Mary knows all too well.

Now that Elisabeth the Blood Queen has risen, there’s nothing they can do.

“Claire… Ah…”

Claire gets tossed aside, her skin pallid from the blood loss.

Next, Elisabeth turns her beautiful gaze on Mary. In her eyes, Mary is nothing more than food.

“Oh…Queen Elisabeth…” Mary trembles as she shrinks backward.

Her master is risen.

Elisabeth is the strongest of the Progenitors, and there’s no way to stop her. Once again, Mary was too late.

Tears well up in her eyes.

In an instant, though, the despair in her eyes turns to astonishment.

A dark figure appears out of nowhere and crashes into Elisabeth. An ebony blade collides with Elisabeth’s crimson claws.

It’s the woman in the bodysuit they met down in the library—Beta.

“Secure her!!” she shouts, and three other figures appear to protect Claire.

Beta blocks Elisabeth’s claws with her sword, then leaps backward to put some space between them.

“Number 665, what’s her status?”

“Still breathing. But she needs treatment badly.”

“Noted. Unfortunately…I doubt *she* plans on just letting us go.”

The naked girl begins walking toward Beta.

“You three, back me up.”

“Roger that.”

“Ms. Vampire Hunter, I’m leaving Ms. Claire in your hands for now.”

“Oh, Claire…”

Mary takes Claire from Number 665 and cradles her in her arms.

Then she calls out to stop Beta from trying to fight Elisabeth “No, you can’t…”

She needs to warn her.

“It’s impossible… Not even you can beat her…”

From beneath her mask, Beta casts a feline glance Mary’s way.

“Even if that’s the case, this is my mission.”

With her ebony blade in hand, Beta faces off against the Blood Queen.

How did things get this bad…?

Beta laments her failure as she faces off against the Blood Queen.

It’s all her fault that her lord’s sister’s life is in such danger.

Her master hasn’t shown up yet. There must be an important reason why he had to prioritize some other matter, which means he implicitly left the situation here for Beta and the others to handle.

However, Beta hadn’t realized that until it was too late.

Because of that, the worst-case scenario is unfolding before her eyes.

If the unthinkable happened and her master’s sister were to fall, Beta wouldn’t be able to face him anymore.

“Time to see what I can do against the legendary Blood Queen…,” she murmurs. Her eyes are filled with determination.

There’s only has one way she can fix her mistake: by beating the Blood Queen.

An intense look crosses Beta’s face as she concentrates magic into her ebony blade. Then she taps her toes against the ground to signal her orders to her subordinates.

The other three fan out.

They’re ready to act at a moment’s notice.

Beta stares at the Blood Queen and waits for the timing to line up.

All the Blood Queen is doing is slowly walking forward to close the distance. As the Red Moon’s light shines on her nude body, she stares right back at Beta. Although the look in her eyes is inscrutable, she seems almost sleepy.

She enters Beta’s range.

“—Hyah!!”

Beta’s slash marks the start of the battle.

Her attack’s gentle elegance call Shadow’s swordsmanship to mind.

The Blood Queen blocks it with the claws on her left hand. As she does, her right moves to attack.

However, before she can, Number 666 launches an assault on her from behind.

The Blood Queen has no choice but to use her right hand’s claws to ward Number 666’s attack off.

At the same time, Numbers 664 and 665 are already rushing in from her sides, and Beta begins her follow-up attack, as well.

The Blood Queen casts a drowsy glance at the three slashes bearing down on her—then only protects her heart.

All three blades cleave deep into her fair skin.

Fresh blood fills the air and sullies her flesh. However, she doesn’t so much as stir.

“I—I can’t get it out!” cries Number 664.

The three swords, still buried in the Blood Queen’s body, refuse to budge.

By catching their attacks in her muscle sinew, the Blood Queen has succeeded in sealing their movements, too.

“Rgh!!” Beta reinforces her body, then forcibly rips her sword free.

However, Numbers 664 and 665 don’t act in time.

“Change your swords’ shapes!” Beta cries. But she’s too late.

The Blood Queen’s claws bear down on the two of them.

That’s when Number 666 makes her move.

In a beautiful display of swordwork, she slices through the Blood Queen’s tendons.

When she does, the vampire’s arms go limp. They regenerate a moment later, but it’s just long enough for the other two to change their slime swords’ shapes and yank them free.

Then Beta lands a slash on the Blood Queen’s face, Number 664 lops a chunk out of her side, Number 665 slices open the tendons in her leg, and finally, Number 666 sends her flying with a slash to the back.

The Progenitor’s naked body crashes into the wall.

“Good work, 666.”

Number 666 responds with a tiny nod.

Buried in the rubble, the Blood Queen can’t move. Beta warily readies her blade, making sure to keep a safe distance back.

All it had taken was a glance for Beta to determine that the Blood Queen was a formidable foe.

Her initial impression was that fighting her one-on-one would be impossible. Even with three of her subordinates, she’d been expecting a rough fight.

In reality, she *had* been a fearsome opponent.

However, she’s easier to fight than Beta had anticipated.

The rookies were exceeding her expectations, too. It’s just as Lambda had told her—between Number 664’s leadership, Number 665’s wisdom and intellect, and Number 666’s battle prowess, they made for a solid team.

“We might just be able to win this…,” Beta says unthinkingly.

But—

“You can’t… You people are strong, I’ll give you that. But Queen Elisabeth has only just awoken… This isn’t anywhere close to her full strength.” Mary’s eyes are filled with tears and despair as she cradles Claire. “Queen Elisabeth…has always been a late riser!”

“Huh?”

The Blood Queen’s magic is rising explosively, causing the very air to tremble.

When she rises from the rubble, she’s clad in a dress the color of blood.

No, that’s not quite it.

She’s clad in blood in the shape of a dress.

Her once-naked body is now hidden away under liquid. It slithers hypnotically over her skin, almost as if it were alive.

Beneath her mask, Beta grimaces, feeling the power radiating from the vampire.

“So *this* is the Blood Queen.”

Something cold runs up Beta’s spine. She can feel in her very skin just how fundamentally outmatched they are.

The Blood Queen is an honest-to-god monster.

The only person who could possibly stand up to such a freak of nature is her master.

“Beta…” Number 664 looks toward Beta for guidance.

Beta shakes her head.

She doubts the Blood Queen would let them escape if they tried, and they’d have to leave her master’s sister behind anyway, so the plan is a nonstarter.

A voice breaks the tension.

“Well, well, well, I see you have quite the monster here… Allow me to join the fray.”

Its owner is the nine-tailed fox who just appeared. Her silvery hair flutters as she snaps her iron folding fans open.

“You’re… Yukime the Spirit Fox…”

Beta’s never met her in person, but she’s fully familiar with the Lawless City’s rulers.

She and Yukime exchange a stare, each trying to discern something about the other.

Beta makes her decision. “We appreciate the help.”

“Then let us fight as comrades.”

They all square off against the Blood Queen.

However, they’re interrupted by yet another intruder.

“Hey now. Don’t go gettin’ this party started without me.”

The tanned behemoth marks his arrival by smashing in through the windowpane. Lifting his massive billhook onto his shoulder, he looks at the Blood Queen and scoffs.

“So you the boss round these parts? This town’s mine, lady. Don’t go thinkin’ you can just come in and do as you please.”

“Where exactly did you come in from?”

“Where I came in from is none of your damn business, hag. But this woman’s head is mine.”

“Oh, be my guest.”

The tanned giant readies his billhook.

Beta knows who he is, too. He’s one of the Lawless City’s other rulers, Juggernaut the Tyrant.

Now, all three of the Lawless City’s rulers are gathered in one room. Each of them boasts power enough to control a third of the city, and a full two of them are squaring off against the Blood Queen alongside her.

Beta thanks her lucky stars. They still have a chance.

“Take that!!” Juggernaut seizes the initiative.

With barbaric movements, he closes the gap and brings his billhook crashing down.

The Blood Queen doesn’t so much as move an inch.

“Th’ hell?!”

Although the vampire is the one who takes the weapon head on, the surprised shout comes from Juggernaut.

His billhook passes right through her without stopping.

“Mistform?!”

It’s the ability exclusive to powerful vampires that allows the user to turn their body into fog.

When the Blood Queen uses it, though, there isn’t any warning or lead-up. And what’s worse, she’s able to use it only on the part of her body in the billhook’s path.

“This is bull!!” Juggernaut swings his weapon in a wide sweep.

Once again, the Blood Queen takes the attack without even flinching. Her neck distorts for a moment as the billhook passes through it like air.

Then an orb of blood gathers at her right hand.

It’s filled with insane amounts of magic.

Yukime and Beta cry out in unison.

“That’s dangerous!”

“Get down!!”

The Progenitor releases the orb into the air, and it explodes.

When it does, blood sprays around them. In the blink of an eye, though, it coalesces into arrows and goes flying at each person present. The projectiles paint the air scarlet.

“—!!” Beta doesn’t hesitate.

She immediately moves to cover Claire and blocks the arrows with her body.

Her slime bodysuit hardens over her vitals, and she cuts down as many of the arrows as she can while using her body as a shield.

The projectiles cut deep lacerations into her cheeks, arms, and thighs.

Finally, the rain of arrows dies down.

Claire is unharmed.

Beta, on the other hand…

“Y-you…” The words get caught in Mary’s throat as she looks at her.

Beta’s black bodysuit has been spliced to ribbons, exposing her white skin and the red blood trickling from the dozens of punctures in her arms and legs.

“Rgh… I’m fine.”

Blood streams from Beta’s body and pools around her feet as she readies her sword.

However, not everyone was able to move like Beta had.

Number 664 is covered in wounds, and she’s losing blood from her abdomen at an alarming rate.

Number 665 is in the same condition, with lacerations running all over her body and heavy injuries to her feet.

Number 666 is covered in cuts, too, but none of her wounds seem serious.

Yukime took a couple hits, although she doesn’t look too bad.

As for Juggernaut, who was getting up close and personal when the bloody rain started…

“That stings like a mother…”

He’s utterly drenched in blood.

The arrows hit him all over, dying his tanned skin red. Even so, he remains standing on his own two feet with his billhook perched upon his shoulder.

The weapon in question is notably chipped. He must have used it to protect his vitals.

“Dammit… What the hell’s up with this chick…?”

Even so, he soon drops to one knee.

“The Red Moon… I finally remembered. To think that the Blood Queen was a Progenitor Vampire…!” Yukime’s face goes white.

“Th’ hell’s that?”

“An age-old tale… A legend of a vampire who destroyed several countries in a just three days. Knowing that, Mr. Shadow must have come to stop her…!”

“She took out a country in just three days…?” Juggernaut’s face twists into a grimace as he looks up at the Blood Queen.

At this point, there isn’t anyone present who doubts the legends.

“Fall back, 664 and 665.” Seeing that they’re in no state to continue fighting, Beta issues her orders. “You too, 666.”

“But I can still fight!”

“Don’t you have something you need to accomplish?”

“…Huh?”

Beta smiles beneath her mask as she steps forward.

Given the situation, no matter how they fight, even if they all work together, they can’t possibly win.

However, there’s still a way for them to emerge victorious.

After all, they have Beta’s master.

All she has to do is buy time until he shows up.

No matter what happens, no matter whom he has to face, Beta’s master is her absolute.

She squares off against the Blood Queen and gathers as much magic in her ebony sword as she can.

“Wha—?!”

Suddenly, though, her power starts running wild. She tries dropping her output to regain control, but her rampaging magic refuses to be quelled.

“Rgh!”

“Beta?!”

A familiar, unpleasant pain runs across her body.

Her skin starts turning black around the wounds where the blood arrows hit her.

These—these are symptoms of the possession.

Now that she knows the cause, Beta immediately changes how she’s trying to suppress her magic. She’s largely successful in getting it to settle down, but she’s still having a hard time controlling it.

Meanwhile, the Blood Queen makes her move.

She creates a gigantic orb of blood above her head, then piles enough magic into it that the air starts to quiver.

“No…”

Beta’s voice trembles. This attack looks to be far more powerful than the last, and she isn’t in much of a condition to move at the moment.

She hears shouts from behind her.

“Claire?! Claire, pull it together!”

Beta turns her head to see Claire in Mary’s arms. Her wounds are turning black, too.

Wait, she isn’t—

Everything is going horribly, horribly wrong.

The hovering orb condenses, ready to burst at any moment.

“Master Shadow, forgive me…,” whispers Beta, her voice sounding like she’s on the verge of tears—and Claire’s eyes snap open.

Claire is dreaming.

The white space she’s floating in seems to go on forever. She doesn’t see anything else there. Only her.

She just hears the beating of her own heart.

“…Can you hear me?”

Suddenly, she thinks she can make out a sound. She looks up.

“Can you hear my voice…?”

Now she’s sure of it.

When she looks in the voice’s direction, she sees a woman with long black hair. Claire peers into the woman’s violet eyes.

“Who are you…?”

“I’m here to help you.”

“Help me?”

“Yes, you.” The woman’s purple eyes sweep over Claire’s body.

“Huh? Wait, what’s going on?”

Claire’s fair skin is beginning to turn black.

It’s the exact same symptom as the one she experienced in the past.

“This can’t be…the possession?”

“Technically, it’s a little different. He cured you long ago of the thing you call the possession. He knows everything, after all.”

“Wait. It’s healed? And who is ‘he’…?”

“I believe you know him quite well.”

“No, I don’t. Who are you talking about?”

The violet-eyed woman’s only answer is a cryptic smile.

“Soon, the corruption will overtake you. That’s why I’ve come to lend you a bit of my power.”

“Hey, hold up! I still don’t have a clue what’s going on here!”

“Forgive me, but explanations aren’t exactly my strong suit.”

“Please, just tell me. What’s going on with my body?!”

“Hmm, how to put this simply…? Unfortunately, you’re adapting, and losing control in the process.”

“Sorry, I don’t follow.”

“The full explanation would take too long, and I’m afraid time isn’t on our side. I’ll see how concise I can make it.”

“I appreciate that.”

“Are you familiar with ‘evolution’? Long ago, a colleague I shared a laboratory with told me that humans originally came from apes. According to one theory, apes spent countless years adapting to their environments, and that’s how humans came to be. It’s an interesting hypothesis, although I’m unsure how much water it holds.”

“Um, okay… Does that have anything to do with this?”

“Absolutely. See, the thing is, one of the other researchers asserted that living creatures don’t adapt to their environments. This academic didn’t refute the claim that humans came from apes, though. Even among apes, there are smarter ones and stupider ones. Due to the harsh natural environment, more of the smarter apes survived and went on to breed among themselves and increase their numbers. Over time, only the smart ones were left, and after countless years, they became humans.”

“So, um, isn’t that the same thing? And also, what’s the point of telling me this?”

“They’re completely different. In other words, just because the apes happened to adapt to their environments doesn’t mean they adapted by choice.”

“O…kay?”

“See, the thing is…forgive me, what were we talking about again?”

“You were talking about me, right…? At least, I think you were.”

“Right, right, I was talking about adaptation.”

“…Huh?”

“The point of the matter is, the children who happen to adapt to their environments survive and gradually change their forms. The fact that the blood’s nature is currently divided in two is the product of adaptation as well. The original type placed too large a burden on its carrier’s body, so all those descendants died out. But when the blood split in two, its properties were divided as well. Now, though, both types of blood are trying to adapt to each other inside you. They split in two for a reason, so they don’t adapt to each other easily. But unfortunately, you fulfill the conditions, and even worse, you have no means by which to control them. That’s why your blood is running wild and destroying your bod—ah, we’re out of time.”

“H-hey, hold up, the part you just got to sounded really important! Wait, ow?!”

A sharp pain suddenly shoots across Claire's hand. When she looks at its back, she finds an intricate magic circle drawn on it.

"The seal will teach you how to control it."

"Hey, it's healing."

The black bruises are gone.

"Our time is up, and things are looking bad out there."

"You know, you could have skipped the first half of that explanation."

"I'm afraid I'm going to need to borrow your body for a little bit. I won't be able to use my full strength, but…"

With that, the violet-eyed woman's body starts going hazy and indistinct.

"Wait! What's your name?!"

"Aurora…"

"Aurora… Why did you save me?"

"Because you're his…" Aurora's voice grows faint.

"His what? Who is 'he'?!"

"Shadow…"

Before she can finish her sentence, Aurora vanishes completely.

"Wait… Shadow…?"

As she stands frozen in place, Claire whispers his name.

As Mary cradles Claire in her arms, Claire's eyes snap open.

They're now a beautiful shade of violet.

Then Claire suddenly rises to her feet. Those purple eyes make Mary catch her breath.

"Claire, your eyes…"

That isn't the only thing that's changed. The air about her feels more mature, and the quality of her magic seems different, too.

The biggest difference, though…is the fact that all her wounds have closed.

There's blood smeared around the gash on her chest, but the crimson liquid squirms and coalesces in the air as an orb.

It's just like what the Blood Queen did.

"Now then, let's see how much this girl's body can withstand…," Claire murmurs. Her voice is calm and collected, and the way she's talking, it's almost as if she's someone else entirely.

"Are you really Claire…?"

The moment the question leaves Mary's mouth, the Blood Queen's blood orb bursts.

The spray transforms into arrowheads so thick and unavoidable, they strike despair into every heart present.

They're all frozen, unable to do anything but stare at the hopelessness bearing down upon them.

Everyone except *her*, that is.

“Sorry. But I’m the original…,” Claire mutters softly. Her blood orb bursts, too.

When it does, it scatters into tiny, tiny droplets. The blood practically forms a mist.

The incoming blood arrows get stuck in it.

“Huh?”

Mary is the only one who utters a word, but she’s far from the only one doubting their eyes.

The blood arrows have lost their momentum. They drip harmlessly to the floor.

“Once you released it from your body, stealing control of your blood was child’s play. I wasn’t able to take it all, but…”

Claire is grinning bewitchingly and looking at the vampire, who’s currently sporting several wounds.

After Claire’s blood mist stole control of the arrows, she turned them around. However, it was successful on only a few of them. All the others she was forced to just drop on the ground.

Still, the feat isn’t something a human being could pull off.

It’s like watching two Blood Queens go at it. Everyone is at a loss for words.

“Come now, projectiles are no way to fell a witch.” Claire licks up the blood spattered across her lips. It stains her tongue bright red.

Then the Blood Queen makes her move.

Her arrow wounds heal in an instant, and as they do, her blood dress changes form.

What was once a dress is now gory feelers.

In the flash of an eye, they propagate.

“See now, that’s more like it…,” Claire says, then releases feelers of her own from her body. They look the exact same as the Blood Queen’s.

The scarlet feelers spread, each set seeming like it’s trying to intimidate the other.

All at once, the battle begins.

Each spear-like tip rushes forward to meet the enemy.

Some of them come up from beneath the floor and others come down from the ceiling, but there are enough of them to pack the room full. Both combatants are assailed from all directions.

Many of them crash into each other, leaving scant few that reach their marks.

When they see the feelers bear down on them, Claire draws a scarlet scythe and the Blood Queen extends her crimson claws.

Then they each slice down the enemy’s feelers with a single strike.

The feelers soar through the air, crash into each other, slice each other up, and paint the room ruby with fresh blood. The Red Moon’s light streams

down from the newly opened holes in the ceiling, casting the two beautiful women in its radiant glow.

Their fight is playing out too quickly for the eye to keep up with. They're utterly inhuman.

Nobody can tear their gaze from the exquisitely savage battle.

"They're incredible…"

"What a battle…"

Are the two evenly matched? It's impossible for any of the observers to tell.

All they know is neither of them has dealt a decisive blow yet.

As the feelers' fervent dance drags on, Claire sighs.

"We seem to be at an impasse. However"—she flashes an impish grin—"you've breathed in quite a bit of my blood mist, haven't you?"

As the words leave her mouth, the Blood Queen collapses to one knee.

Gory vomit gushes from her mouth. Red tears stream from her eyes. Blood gushes from every orifice in her body.

"Groah…"

For the first time, the Progenitor lets out a moan of pain.

"You really have to make sure you take control of the mist you breathe in, you know."

Claire's feelers surge toward the kneeling Blood Queen.

She tries to raise feelers to defend herself, but they're crushed under the mass of Claire's assault.

The wall of feelers conceals the vampire from view. Blood fills the air.

All that's left of her is a red puddle.

"It's a far cry from my full strength, but perhaps it will do."

The mature bearing. The enigmatic smile. The inhuman battle prowess. The violet eyes.

The Claire standing there with her arms crossed isn't the girl Mary knows.

"Claire, what in the world happened to you…?"

She casts a fleeting glance Mary's way and offers her a troubled smile. It almost resembles Claire's.

The next moment, though, her violet eyes are filled with caution.

A dense mist of blood envelops their surroundings, eventually coalescing into the shape of a person.

"You're kidding…"

"This can't be. She's still *alive*…?"

Alarmed voices fill the air, but Mary understands. The Elisabeth she knew wouldn't go down so easily.

As Claire is right now, though, she's going toe to toe with her.

As long as she's here, the tragedy of a thousand years ago won't be repeated.

But as the unharmed Blood Queen emerges from the mist, Claire's body keels forward.

She drops to one knee.

“I suppose this body has reached its limit…”

The look on her face is pained, and a line of blood trickles from her mouth. Claire’s body is unable to withstand the inhuman power it’s putting out.

Claire is kneeling, and the Blood Queen is lording over her. It’s a complete reversal of the scene from just moments ago.

“Man, we just can’t catch a break here…”

“This is bad…”

“Oh, no…”

Mary’s eyes water.

If Claire goes down, there won’t be anyone left to stop Elisabeth.

The tragedy will repeat itself, and when everything is over, her queen will fall into despair once more…

Mary never wants to go through that again.

She rushes to Claire’s side. “Claire!”

“You’re…”

“Claire, are you okay?! I’ll—I’ll buy you some time.”

Mary draws her sword and squares off against the Blood Queen.

“It’s fine. I’ve done enough.” Claire extends a feeler and stops Mary in her tracks. “My work here is done. All I needed to do was buy time until *he* showed up…”

A radiant smile spreads across her face.

“‘He’…?”

“That’s right. He’s here…”

An ebony shadow descends on them.

“My name is Shadow. I lurk in the darkness and hunt down shadows…”

Upon seeing him, Claire collapses with a relieved look on her face.

The ebony figure’s longcoat flutters behind him as he draws his blade.

“Hey, it’s that little—!”

“Good heavens! You’re—!”

“—Master Shadow!”

Beta trembles with joy.

Her faith in her master is absolute.

Ever since she and the others were young and weak, he’s tirelessly stood before them to fight back the darkness. She grew up watching him from behind.

Even against the Blood Queen, she’s sure he’ll be fine.

Maybe it’s because of how safe he makes her feel, or maybe it’s because of how long it’s been since she last saw him, but she feels almost as though his body is a little bit bigger than usual.

But not everyone necessarily feels the same way.

“The hell you show up *now* for?”

“Mr. Shadow, be careful. The Blood Queen, she is not normal.”

The look Juggernaut casts Shadow’s way is disgruntled, and the one Yukime does is filled with worry.

How rude! Beta glares at the two of them.

While all that is going on, the air between Shadow and the Blood Queen is growing tense.

Shadow readies his ebony blade. The Blood Queen deploys her red feelers.

That’s when Beta realizes.

The aura the Blood Queen is emanating has grown even stronger.

“The woman’s a monster…”

“Sweet heavens! That wasn’t her full strength…?”

Juggernaut and Yukime seem to have noticed it, too. The Blood Queen’s power has grown since her fight against Claire.

Her eyes flash like scarlet rubies as her blood dress writhes even more animatedly than before.

The tension between her and Shadow reaches its crescendo—and at long last, the blood feelers and the ebony blade meet.

Innumerable feelers bear down on Shadow, but his ebony blade arches beautifully through the air as it slices them all down.

Trails of red and black collide over and over as the combatants’ terrifying speed leaves all the bystanders in the dust.

For them, though, the attacks are meant as little more than feints.

Suddenly, the Blood Queen’s body wavers, and a second later she’s behind him.

Her red claws are aimed straight at his back.

Shadow’s body abruptly wavers in turn.

The claws find nothing but empty space as the black sword impales the Blood Queen from behind.

Sploosh.

The Blood Queen bursts with a sound like water being dumped from a bucket, and blood arrows fill the air around them.

As Shadow swats them down, the Blood Queen puts some space between them.

They square off again, as though the fight just started over from the beginning.

“He’s…goin’ toe to toe with that monster?”

“My! What incredible speed…”

The battle was far too fast for any of them to make out, but they all gawk at it regardless. Beta’s heart is filled with joy.

This is her master in all his glory.

At the same time, though, she feels uneasy in a way she can’t quite put into words. There’s something about him that seems just a little off…

Before she can try to figure out what it is, the Blood Queen makes her move.

She detaches two of her feelers, then uses their blood to create two copies of herself.

“Watch out! This is what made Queen Elisabeth the strongest Progenitor: her ability to make blood copies of herself and control them at will!”

Immediately after Mary finishes shouting, three of her queens shoot feelers at Shadow.

The ebony blade slices through their feints.

The battle is playing out just like it did before.

Unlike last time, though, there are three Blood Queens that use the feelers’ cover to launch a surprise attack this time.

One of them attacks from behind, one from above, and the last from his side.

Shadow adroitly avoids all three.

His defensive movements are so flowing and elegant that it’s almost like he knew where the Blood Queens were going to come from. Their dance seems destined to go on forever.

As the fight goes on, though, Beta comes to realize her initial sense of unease is growing larger and larger.

What is it?

In all her memory, has her master ever spent this long crossing blades with an opponent?

—No.

Something is different.

Something about her master is off.

Suddenly, apprehension surges through her heart.

She devotes her full attention to the battle, trying to figure out what it is that’s making her so worried.

The red feelers assault Shadow, then the three Blood Queens ambush him from his blind spots.

As she watches the process repeat, Beta finally realizes.

For all his skillful defense, none of Shadow’s movements are leading into counterattacks.

No matter how well someone protects themselves, they’ll never take their opponent out if they don’t hit back.

So why isn’t Shadow counterattacking?

The endless onrush of feelers coming from every direction is limiting his movement, and the Blood Queen’s surprise attacks are constantly leaving him on the back foot.

How can that be happening?

There’s a reason for it—Shadow’s legs aren’t moving.

Beta knows her master, and she knows that he normally dodges his opponent's attacks with an undetectable amount of movement so he can immediately shift into his counterattack.

Yet now, he's repelling the feelers with his sword. Because he's using his sword to block the assault, his counterattacks are delayed by a beat. During that time, the Blood Queens invariably bear down on him with their claws, so he loses the chance to strike back entirely.

Why—?

Why aren't you dodging, my lord—?

His feet are sluggish. His movements are stiff.

That combat style he's using, where he stands in place and repels the feelers manually—it's almost as though he's protecting something precious.

"—Gh?!"

That's when the pieces click into place.

Beta herself is standing behind Shadow.

Behind her are the wounded Number 664 and Number 665, Number 666 trying to protect them, and her master's unconscious sister…

"O-oh…" Beta's voice trembles.

This whole time—he's been covering for them.

He's spent the entire fight protecting them all.

That's why he hasn't been dodging.

Tears well up in Beta's eyes.

"Master Shadow…"

Then the equilibrium finally shatters.

The red feelers smash into Shadow, and the three Blood Queens press the assault.

He's sent flying and crashes through the wall.

"Mas-Master Shadowwwwwwwwwww!!" Beta's heartbroken shriek echoes through the room.

Ignoring her body's screams of agony, she practically drags herself toward the collapsed wall.

"No, no… Master Shadow… Master Shadow… Master Shadow!!"

This would never have happened if they hadn't been dragging him down.

Beta curses her own weakness.

She hates herself for not even being able to stand up.

Tears stream ceaselessly from her eyes as she crawls along the floor and leaves a bloody trail in her wake.

"Master Shadow! Master Shadow!!" Beta stretches her hand toward the shattered wall.

Before she can reach it, bluish-purple magic comes pouring from the rubble.

"Wha—?!"

"What is—?!"

Its power is so overwhelming that the air is shaking and the rubble is floating up off the ground. The bluish-purple magic paints over the moon's red light.

Then Shadow emerges from the other side of the wall clad in a colossal mantle of energy.

"Master Shadow!!"

Her lord is standing there the same as ever.

The unease Beta felt is gone.

She sees her master surrounded by his beautiful bluish-purple magic.

Although he looks a little smaller for whatever reason, he's brimming with power.

He focuses the magic into his sword and squares back off against the Blood Queen.

"I might just show you what I'm capable of…"

Beta's heart leaps when she hears his voice. It's so deep, it sounds like it's coming from the depths of the abyss.

There's nothing left to be worried about.

She feels almost sorry for the Blood Queen, now that her master isn't pulling his punches anymore.

"Oh, Master Shadow, thank good— Huh?"

Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, Beta sees something glimmering behind the wall.

For some reason, there's a huge pile of gold coins strewn about there. Beta cocks her head to the side.

Why would there be…? Oh, whatever.

Given the fact that her master is fine, everything else seems trivial in comparison.

"Master Shadow! You can do iiiiiiiit!!"

And with Beta's cheer of encouragement, the battle begins anew.

Bluish-purple magic rages all around Shadow.

"Shit! He's a fair match for the Blood Queen… No, he's *stronger*…"

"Verily. No human can wield magic like this…"

Shadow's heels go *click*, *click* on the floor as he strides nonchalantly toward the Blood Queen. However, the Blood Queen has no intention of letting his arrogance stand.

A massive number of blood feelers surround Shadow and assail him.

He fends them off with his sword.

Then he takes a casual step forward.

"Wha—?!"

"What is he—?!"

Everyone present can tell just how terrifying his footsteps are.

He isn't even using his sword anymore.

The innumerable feelers all just stream past him, almost as though they're trying to avoid contact.

Another step.

Click.

It's as carefree as the last.

The way the Blood Queen's feelers keep missing, it's like watching a magic trick.

Shadow's completely seen through their trajectories.

He dodges them with the tiniest movements possible, then closes the gap one step at a time. It's like he's saying they're not worthy of his notice.

Even when a Blood Queen appears behind him, he dodges her almost before she strikes, then keeps walking.

He doesn't counterattack.

He knows he doesn't need to.

He just ignores them and keeps walking.

All he's looking at is the real Blood Queen.

"He's dodgin' her attacks just by walking—?!"

"Such microscopic movements…! Is that even possible…?" Yukime gasps.

He's attained an ideal.

Perfect movements. The kind people imagine, the kind they only dream of. He's reached the pinnacle of martial skill.

"So *this* is the real Shadow…"

"Mayhap he is the real monster…!"

Click, click, click. The sound from his boots echoes throughout the room.

Finally, he comes to a stop.

When he does, the blood feelers pause, too.

He's so close, he could reach out and touch her.

For a short while, the beautiful Blood Queen and the jet-black Shadow just stare at each other.

The Blood Queen stands with the crimson moon at her back. Shadow stands clad in his bluish-purple magic.

Everything is still, almost as if all the tempestuous violence had never happened.

Yet despite the utter silence, it feels as though the two of them are conversing.

"You seek death…?" Shadow's voice is low and deep, as if it were coming from the depths of the abyss. "Very well…"

A tremendous amount of magic gathers in his ebony blade.

The bluish-purple energy converges in a spiral.

The Blood Queen extends her crimson claws.

Why is it…? Why is it that those loathsome nails seem full of sorrow now…?

"—Wait!!"

That's why Mary leaps forward.

"Please, wait!!"

She dashes toward them.

They can start over. She's certain of it.

That’s why she needs to—!

“Queen Elisabeth!!”

She frantically stretches out her hand.

But…the blood feelers knock her away.

“I AM…”

Shadow’s heartless voice sounds out.

“Queen Elisabeth!!” Mary screams.

For a second, Elisabeth looks her way.

Her red eyes gaze gently at her.

“…ATOMIC. RECOVERY.”

The red claws and the black sword collide, and the world disappears into the bluish-purple light.

“Uhh…”

She must have passed out.

When Beta opens her eyes, she’s greeted by the Red Moon’s light shining down on a quiet night.

Everyone else is unconscious. She must have been the first one to wake up.

Her master is nowhere to be seen.

He’s probably already on his way to his next battle. How busy he is…and how kind.

“Thank you, Master Shadow…”

She vows never to forget the image of him putting his life on the line to protect her and the others.

When she suddenly notices that all her wounds are healed, a silent smile creeps across her face.

She looks and sees that Number 664’s wounds are healed, too, as are Number 665’s and Number 666’s.

Naturally, there isn’t a scratch on Mary or her master’s sister, either.

“Nothing gets by Master Shadow. It seems like Eta’s theory was right…”

Beta retrieves a drop of the Blood Queen’s blood and seals it in a vial.

Then she focuses her mind on her own blood plastered across her bodysuit…and causes it to hover into the air.

“Vampiric powers, huh…? With proper training, these could be useful. *Sigh*…I bet Eta’s going to use me as a lab rat… Hyah!”

Beta launches her blood through the air, then goes to wake her subordinates up.

“Ow.”

“Huh?!”

“Where am I?”

“Are you three planning on sleeping all day? We’re heading back.”

The Numbers frantically scramble to their feet.

“Rgh…,” groans Juggernaut. “What happened?”

“What happened, indeed…”

It seems like the two from the Lawless City are up, too.

They look around in astonishment.

“Wait, Shadow did all this…?”

“The man protected everyone all on his own…”

The Crimson Tower’s been annihilated. They all look up at the sky. As though trying to burn his existence into their very eyes…

Beta turns around. “Come on, we’re going.”

“Ungh…”

“Ahh…!”

It sounds like Claire and Mary just woke up behind her.

Beta glances backward and sees Mary helping someone up from amid the rubble.

It’s an adorable little girl with dark crimson hair.

“I hope you’re able to find it this time… Your Haven, that is…”

And with a kind smile, Beta vanishes into the darkness of the night.

As the morning sun beats down on me, I gaze at the elegant, black-lacquered carriage and yawn.

The carriage’s windows are blocked by a thick curtain, so I can’t see inside, but I imagine my sister is exchanging teary good-byes with her vampire friend.

The autumn air is crisp and pleasant.

All sorts of stuff went down, but the real-deal Vampire Progenitor event has come to an end.

Things got a little rocky when I ran into some unforeseen problems in the middle there, but at the end of the day, I was able to rescue the big finish. And hey, all’s well that ends well, amirite?

The one thing I didn’t manage to rescue, though, was all the gold coins. For a while there, I was sitting pretty on a whole three thousand coins, but because of, shall we say, a myriad of circumstances, I ended the day with a scant five hundred.

Five hundred coins come out to five hundred million *zeni*. That’s nowhere near enough for me to retire on.

But after some thought, I’ve come to the conclusion that maybe this is fine.

After all, the Lawless City is still standing, and it’s still got two towers left.

If I ever run low on funds, I can just stop by again. In a way, the Lawless City is basically my own personal piggy bank.

A little while later, the carriage door opens and Claire steps out.

Speaking of my sister, there’s been a big development on that front.

It happened last night, at our inn.

I did kinda wander off on my own back in the Lawless City, so I stopped by her room to make a cursory apology.

When I opened her door, I saw something.

There was some sorta badass magic circle on her hand, and she was wrapping it up in a bandage to hide it.

And to make matters worse, she was muttering, “My right hand is trembling… A special power awakens in me…”

I chose to say nothing and quietly closed the door.

She’s got the three-hit combo trope of a magic circle, a bandage cover, and a special power going on.

I guess she’s finally getting to that age…

When she steps out of the carriage, she walks toward me with a suggestive smile on her face.

I call out to her in as normal a tone as I can muster.

“You all set?”

“Yup, let’s go.”

The two of us set off.

Suddenly, though…

“Cid…”

…she hugs me from behind.

“…What’s up?”

“It’s nothing… No, it is something… See, the truth is…”

Here it comes…!

“I have a special power sleeping within me…”

She’s doing her big coming-out scene.

It wouldn’t do for me to refute her here. If you carelessly shut children down, they’re liable to get rebellious on you.

“Figures. I always knew you were special, Sis.”

“I knew you’d believe me, Cid…” She squeezes a little tighter. “I have to unravel the secret behind this power. And the secrets surrounding *him*…”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure you’ll do great. I’ll support you no matter what path you take, Claire.”

“Cid…have you heard of Shadow?”

“Oh, yeah, he was crazy cool back at the Bushin Festival. Why, did he do something?”

“…No, it’s nothing.” Claire hugs me tight.

There are probably no shortage of hardships waiting for my sister after this. She’ll struggle, she’ll suffer, and she’ll have to confront some cold, hard truths. But if her right hand is “throbbing,” there’s no getting around it. It’s all part of growing up, after all.

No matter what path she eventually decides to take, I’ll respect her for it. After all, the path she’s walking is the path I, too, once walked…

Suddenly, I feel a gaze on my back. I turn to look.

There’s a girl standing in the black-lacquered carriage carrying a large black parasol.

I can’t see her face because it’s hidden behind it, but I can make out her lovely crimson hair fluttering in the autumn breeze.

Under the parasol, she bows deeply.

The Eminence in Shadow

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I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as
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I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
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behind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
I wanted to be one of them.
Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

Field Notes on a Little Brother—by Young Claire!

The Eminence in Shadow
Volume 3

Auxiliary Chapter

Auxiliary Chapter

Field Notes on a Little Brother—by Young Claire!

Claire Kagenou just turned eight this year and has a brother two years younger than her named Cid Kagenou.

Claire herself is an outstanding young girl.

The Kagenou lineage has produced countless dark knights, and as such, expectations on her are especially high.

Her brother, Cid, on the other hand…is depressingly average.

He's not stupid or anything, and it's not like he hates exercising. But no matter what they make him do, it all comes out flat and uninspired.

If the two of them were a painting, Claire would be smack-dab in the middle, the focus of the work, and her brother would probably be mistaken for some bystander just passing along behind her.

—A mismatched pair of siblings.

For some reason, realizing that's how people saw them upset Claire to no end.

In the Kagenou household, dark knight training begins when you're six.

Claire is eight, so she started two years ago, and she's already to the point where she's won a youth tournament.

Her brother Cid just turned six, so he started training recently, too, but…

"Bluuuh… Sis, you're so strong…"

Pathetic words tumble out of his mouth as he crawls along the ground.

"C'mon, that was only a light tap. Don't go crying over something so weak!"

Claire looks down at Cid and prods him with her wooden practice sword.

"H-hey, cut it out…!" Cid squirms, clearly not enjoying himself.

"Look, you *can* still move. See? The only reason you go down so fast is because you don't have any guts!"

"This is tyranny…"

"Good grief, you're pathetic… All right, I just had a great idea." Claire grabs Cid by the scruff of his neck and starts dragging him off.

Their father watches over their training in the mornings, but after that, he has work, so he leaves them to practice on their own.

They don't have a choice in the matter, of course.

Cid looks up at Claire as he slides along the ground. "Wh-where are we going?"

"You're too much of a wimp, so we're gonna go do some special training to build up your character."

"S-special training…?"

"Baldy told us, remember? The Scarface Gang is camped out in the forest nearby."

"Baldy" refers to their father.

Their mother was the first to call him that, and Claire followed her example. Children do learn from their parents, after all.

"Uh-huh, and he told us not to go anywhere near it…"

"Yeah, and that's why we're going!"

"Huh? That doesn't make any sense!"

"If we do, you'll be able to build up some guts!"

"Th-there's no way! W-we shouldn't…"

"See, you always wimp out so quickly! I won a tournament, remember? It's fine, you don't have anything to be worried about."

"I-it was a *youth* tournament… Oh, geez…"

Claire continues dragging Cid along, and eventually they leave the grounds via a side path and make their way to the forest.

The two of them have been walking through the forest for about two hours.

"C'mon, Claire, we should go home, this is dangerous…"

Claire yanks Cid by the hand as she plows forward. "What are you talking about? We just got here!"

"It's almost noon. Mom's gonna be worried about us."

"T-true… If we don't make it back for lunch, she will be mad."

Their father might be a baldy, but their mother is a demon.

"Yeah, think of how mad Mom'll be," Cid agrees.

"…Fine. Today's special training is now complete! You feel a little braver now, right?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah, definitely."

"I'm doing this all for you, so you should feel thankful!"

"Oh, I do, I do."

"All righty, let's head back!"

With that, Claire turns around to head back the way they came—and bumps into someone.

"Hey, no one said there'd be kids round these parts…"

As they hear the deep voice, seven men emerge from the thicket.

Their bodies are clearly trained and their swords are clearly used. These are no ordinary villagers.

“Wait, are you people the Scarface Gang?!”

“Hah, the girl’s heard of us! Sorry, kid…but you ain’t makin’ it home alive.”

They look down at Claire and sneer evilly.

“I—I should be the one saying that to you!” Claire draws her child-size sword.

However, her hands are stiff and shaking.

One of the bandits draws his weapon. “A dark knight to-be, huh? Maybe if we were normal bandits, you coulda pulled something off, but…”

“Wh-what’s that supposed to mean…?!”

“Bad news, kid, but we ain’t your run-of-the-mill thugs. Every member of the Scarface Gang is a dark knight. We go after all sorts of well-guarded noblemen and companies, and we’ve got an international bounty on our heads of over a hundred million *zeni*. Even a whole *group* of dark knights couldn’t take us down.”

Claire glances at her brother trembling beside her, then steps forward to protect him.

“S-so what?!”

“You’re pretty cute, kid, so you’ll probably sell for a decent chunk of change. The boy’s gotta die, though.”

“Don’t you dare touch a hair on Cid’s head!!”

Claire makes the first move.

She’s far faster than any eight-year-old has any right to be, and she slips in front of the man in the blink of an eye.

Clang—a metallic noise rings out.

“Damn, you’re pretty fast.” The man blocks her attack with ease. The two of them lock swords.

“Rgh… Cid, run away!!”

Claire gathers strength in her arms, hoping to buy even a second more.

The moment she does, she suffers a tremendous blow.

“Urk—!”

It’s a kick.

In the middle of their sword-on-sword struggle, the man launches a casual kick her way.

That’s all it takes to smash Claire into a tree and send her crawling across the ground.

The difference between children and adults is despair-inducingly big.

“Gah…”

“Y’know, you weren’t half bad. For a kid, that is.”

“Cid… Run…”

All she wants is to let her brother escape, nothing more. But her wish goes ungranted.

“D-don’t bully my sister!”

Waving his wooden practice sword around, Cid charges into battle.

“Cid… You can’t…”

A tear drips from her eye.

“Oh, buzz off.”

The man’s sword cleaves toward the young Cid.

When she sees her brother fly into the air and crumple lifelessly to the ground, more and more tears flow from Claire’s eyes.

“No… Cid… Cid…!”

—A precious memory flashes across Claire’s mind.

She was only three at the time, so her ability to understand her surroundings was still developing.

Her parents had taken their eyes off her, and she accidentally knocked over a pot that had been on the fire.

Boiling water came gushing over her head.

She was only three, so there was nothing she could do.

Yet at the very last moment, someone yanked her back from behind. She fell on her back and avoided the water by a hairbreadth. She was saved.

And the one who’d pulled her backward was Cid, even though he was only one year old.

Claire’s memories from that far back were all hazy, but that wasn’t the only time Cid saved her.

Whenever she was about to fall out of a window, whenever a stray dog was about to bite her, whenever she got lost and started to cry, Cid was always there to protect her.

Even though nobody believed her, and even though the memories faded with time, he was always there for her.

That’s why she hated it when people thought of them as mismatched.

She wanted everyone to know just how amazing he really was.

But because of that, she put him in harm’s way.

“Cid… I’m sorry… I’m so sorry…”

As her consciousness begins to fade, Claire stretches her hand toward her brother’s still body.

She thinks she sees him casually stand up, but surely that’s just a trick of the eye.

The dark-haired child stands up as though nothing ever happened.

“Aaand…scene for the side character who runs in like a dumbass to save his sister and gets one-hit KO’d. I pulled that one off pretty well, if I do say so myself.”

“W-wait, I’m sure my slash hit you…”

The bandits gawk at him in confusion.

“Nah, all it hit was some of the slime I’m testing out.”

A lump of slime shimmies down from under the boy's shirt and flattens out on the ground.

"Huh, slime…?"

"Its durability isn't exactly up to par. Guess I gotta go collect more."

The boy sighs in exasperation.

He's surrounded by bandits on all sides, yet he doesn't seem afraid in the slightest. What an odd child.

"I was planning on coming and crushing you guys tonight, you know. But my sister does tend to be a bit of a wildcard."

As he talks, the boy picks up his sister's dropped sword.

"I ain't got a clue what to make of this kid. But hey, whatever. This time, I'll make sure I—"

The man's voice suddenly cuts off.

"Cough—bluh!"

He clutches his throat and launches into a coughing fit, hacking up blood.

"Huh…? Why're you guys so weak?"

Fresh blood drips from the child's sword.

The man whose throat got sliced collapses.

"Wh-who the hell is this kid—?!"

The bandits, who watched it all play out, draw their swords in unison.

"I couldn't see his slash! This ain't no normal kid!"

"It's fine, circle around him! He's just a boy, we can surround him and crush—"

"—Exactly."

The boy has already made his move.

"Wha—?!"

"At the end of the day, I'm still just a kid."

The second head gets lopped off.

"B-behind us!!"

Surprised screams sound out.

"My body and magic are both still developing. If you guys surrounded me, that'd be it. I'd have no way to break free."

The boy's voice comes from between the trees as a third and fourth head go flying into the air.

"This ain't real! H-how's the kid so fas—?!"

"Nah, I'm not that fast. A kid's body can't take much more strain than this, see."

Unable to make out Cid's movements, the bandits have no way to fight back as he slices off their heads one after another.

Five. Six.

Now, only one bandit remains.

"—Ah, I getcha. You're right. You ain't that fast. You're just makin' it look like you are."

A metallic noise rings out, and the slaughter comes to a halt.

The bandit with scars running all across his face is blocking the boy's sword.

"Your body's light, so you can accelerate and decelerate like crazy. But your top speed ain't nothin' much."

The bandit leaps backward and puts some distance between them.

"To make up for your body's shortcomings, you had to catch us by surprise, rattle us, and take us down one by one. Good thinkin' for a kid your age."

"Thanks kindly. By the way, does that mean you're Scarface?"

"That's me all right. Scarface, in the flesh." He readies his large knife.

Then he vanishes.

"—Behind you."

He's facing the boy from behind. As Scarface brings his oversize knife down, the kid turns and swings his sword.

The two blades meet—and the boy goes flying.

"You're light."

The tiny body spins through the air. Then he makes a graceful, feline landing.

"'Cause I jumped backward. My hands are all tingly now, though."

The boy shakes his hands like he's trying to return sensation to them.

"You picked a bad fight, kid. My power, my magic, my speed—all of them are stronger than yours."

"True enough." The boy accepts the assertion.

"It's a damn shame… I may be a washout now, but I once walked the path of the blade, too, so I can tell. If you had ten…no, five more years, you coulda been a dark knight known the world round."

"Could be."

"It's a shame the world's gotta miss out on that… But my revenge comes first."

Scarface vanishes once more.

A moment later, his knife whistles through the air and slashes through the boy's body.

It should have cut him right in half.

"What…?!"

The boy's body offers no tactile resistance.

The moment Scarface thinks he's cut the kid in two, the boy's body disappears.

Then he hears a young voice behind him. "That was an afterimage."

"Impossible—!" Scarface whirls around to see the boy standing behind him, unharmed.

"Kid's bodies are fragile, so they hit their limits quickly. Which means all I gotta do—"

The child-issue sword comes slashing down.

"—is break those limits."

It casts a beautiful silver arc through the air as it strikes at Scarface.

“So fast…!”

It’s a miracle he’s able to bring his knife up to block in time.

Scarface grimaces as the heavy impact makes his hand go numb.

Now they’re locked blade to blade.

Given Scarface’s strength, he should be able to send the kid flying with ease. However…

“Rgh, I can’t move! Why—?”

No matter how much strength he puts into it, he can’t make the knife move an inch.

Suddenly, the air trembles. The boy’s magic swells up to incredible levels.

“Wh-why’s your magic…?”

The boy’s eyes are glowing red.

“Overdrive.”

The knife cracks—then shatters into pieces.

The fragments sparkle as they shoot through the air.

Sliced in two, Scarface watches his own blood fly up as he topples to the ground. On his face, his eyes are frozen wide in shock.

The boy looks down and coughs up some blood.

“*Cough…* Guess that’s too big a burden for a kid’s body to bear.”

He wipes the blood off his lips.

He cleans the blood off the sword.

“I give that thirty out of a hundred. A real shadowbroker would never get pushed so far.”

He sighs.

“Sis, wake up!”

Hearing her brother’s voice, Claire immediately snaps awake.

“Cid—?!”

“Thank goodne—urk!”

Claire tearfully squeezes Cid as tight as she can.

“Oh, Cid, you’re okay! Thank goodness! Oh, thank goodness…”

Her chest is bursting with relief and regret.

“I’m sorry! I’m so sorry. You must have been so scared.”

“Urk… Grh… Can’t breathe…”

“Cid, Cid, Cid… Wait, what happened to the bandits?”

Claire’s wits return to her, and she glances around.

The bandits are nowhere to be seen. The only things around them are bloodstains.

“Some…some bounty hunters came, and they all ran away. Then the bounty hunters went after them…,” he replies as he struggles in her arms.

“I see… I guess that makes us lucky.”

“Need…air…”

“Thanks for trying to save me, Cid.”

“Uh, no problem. I did get sent flying, though…”

Claire shakes her head.

She’s remembered an important memory she’d been on the verge of forgetting.

“You’ve always been saving me, Cid. Since the very, very beginning…”

That’s what she loves about him.

“I’m going to become stronger. Then, once I’m strong, it’ll be *my* turn to save *you*.”

She squeezes him tight, determined never to lose him again.

The Eminence in Shadow

onestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as
g as I can remember.
s it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
stermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
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hind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
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mastermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
characters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role
behind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
I wanted to be one of them.
Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

I'll Destroy It All and Start from Scratch!

The Eminence in Shadow
Volume 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 4

I'll Destroy It All and Start from Scratch!

Yukime the Spirit Fox waits for her guest atop the White Tower's highest floor.

The moon's pale light streams in from outside, and the candle on the table illuminates the lavish dinner beside it.

Suddenly, the candle's flame flickers as a shadowy figure appears in the dim light.

"Ah, you're here…"

Shadow, dressed in his jet-black longcoat, appears out of nowhere before the room's sliding door.

"Mr. Shadow, we've been expecting you."

A pair of women wearing bold kimonos greet him.

Shadow sits down across from Yukime.

She offers him a quick bow. "I am greatly in your debt for the incident the other day. Had it not been for you, I would not be alive here today."

Soft flesh jiggles against her boldly low neckline.

"Would you be so gracious as to accept my thanks? Natsu? Kana?" Yukime flashes a charming smile.

Natsu and Kana, the two women, expose their chests and approach Shadow.

"—That won't be necessary."

"Ah, so you are not a man of such tastes…"

Yukime gives them a signal, and Natsu and Kana retreat.

Then she sidles up to Shadow's side and fills his glass.

"Our finest sake."

Shadow doesn't take it.

"—State your business."

"Verily, I wish for us to get close, Mr. Shadow," she whispers in his ear with a smile. "But I know building trust takes time. So instead, I have some interesting information for you."

Her bosom presses against his arm.

"Pray tell, have you heard of the anti-Mitsugoshi alliance? Many companies fear Mitsugoshi's rapid expansion; hence they've joined forces and are plotting to take down Mitsugoshi. Who will win? Mitsugoshi? The

Major Corporate Alliance? Either way, it will surely spark a decisive war for trade in the region…”

She leans in so close, her lips are practically touching his ear.

“And the winner of that war will be neither Mitsugoshi nor the Major Corporate Alliance. It will be you, Mr. Shadow, and it will be I…”

She breathes out a puff of air, then rests her head on Shadow’s shoulder.

“What do you say? Shall we join forces and snatch up everything worth snatching?”

Shadow’s ear twitches.

It’s the middle of the night, and the carriages are about two days’ journey away from the capital of Midgar Kingdom.

The entourage is currently making camp by torchlight.

Each carriage bears a carved logo resembling a mask. It’s proof that they belong to Mitsugoshi, Ltd.

The procession of slumbering carriages is packed to the gills with goods. Rumor has it that a single carriage of Mitsugoshi merchandise is worth over a hundred million *zeni*. Seeing dozens of them lined up like this would be enough to make anyone’s head spin.

Once the goods are brought to the capital, people line up in droves to buy them, and the company makes a killing.

That’s why Mitsugoshi has been able to expand at such an astounding rate.

There’s no shortage of merchants that regard the company as a threat, of course. However, the demand for Mitsugoshi goods is so tremendous that even a whole coalition of merchants wouldn’t stand a chance against them.

Thanks to that, its system has been rock-solid up until now.

However, if a coalition of merchants couldn’t stand up against Mitsugoshi, what about a coalition of companies…?

Now, at long last—the major corporations are getting off their asses and banding together.

Amid the darkness, several figures gaze down at Mitsugoshi’s camp.

Each is wearing a mask on their face and a sword on their hip. They would look like simple brigands if it weren’t for one incongruous fact.

They’re all dark knights.

It isn’t rare for dark knights who’ve committed crimes to fall into lives of banditry, but an entire band of brigands being dark knights is nigh unheard of.

Communicating via hand signals, they creep toward the camp.

Then all at once, they charge.

“Eeeeeeeeek!!”

A female scream rings through the air.

They cut down the silver-haired elf who was standing guard, then go after the rest of the personnel.

The sounds of slaughter echo through the night.

When attacked by a group of dark knights that size, not even Mitsugoshi stands a chance. The final survivor is a beautiful elf with platinum blond hair.

As they drag her out of the carriage, tears well up in her blue eyes.

“Please, I’m begging you. Don’t kill me…”

On seeing how beautiful she is, vulgar sneers creep across the brigands’ faces.

“We’d better make an example of her.”

“Heh-heh. You said it.”

They roughly tie her up.

“An example…?! What’s that supposed to mean?!”

“Wanna find out?”

“N-no, please! Don’t hurt me…!”

One man draws his sword and slowly slices the woman’s dress open from the side, exposing her pale skin.

“Your luck ran out when you guys pissed off the Garter Corporation. All it took the president was a couple words to quell the major corporations’ fighting and unite them under one banner. Mitsugoshi is finished…”

“Wait, no, you don’t mean… You people are…?”

“You guessed it, we’re Garter’s private army. Our power’s on par with that of a small nation.”

Despair flashes across the woman’s eyes.

The man’s smile grows even crueler as his cutting reaches the woman’s chest.

A pair of round white mounds flop out—or rather, they should have.

Instead, the only thing that comes into view is the lump of black clothing that was adhered to her skin.

It covers her body in a flash, hiding her exposed flesh.

“The hell?!”

“I appreciate you being so forthcoming with me.”

The despair in her eyes is gone without a trace. It’s been replaced by the ruthless, resolute gaze that only the truly powerful possess.

“Damn you!” The man swings his sword at her.

She doesn’t dodge.

The sword slams into her neck, then comes to a complete stop. The black garment refuses to let it sink any farther.

“Wha—?!”

The woman looks down coldly at the blade. “—You’re so weak.”

Then she stabs forward.

An ebony blade bursts through the man’s heart and out his back.

He collapses, blood foaming at his mouth. The woman casts a disparaging glance his way, then holds her sword aloft.

“It’s time—punish them.”

Upon hearing her cry, the first victim, the silver-haired elf, stands up and cuts her assailant down.

And that’s just the beginning. The supposedly dead Mitsugoshi employees stand up one after another and wipe out the assassins. Every single one of them is wearing a black garment under their clothes.

The situation’s done a complete one-eighty.

The assassins try to flee, but the women cut them down.

Pleading and death cries fill the air for a spell, but after a little while, the night is silent again.

The platinum blond elf turns to the silver-haired one. “Nights really are nicer when they’re quiet, aren’t they…? Beta, your report.”

“We’ve finished taking out the assassins, Alpha. Our side suffered zero casualties and no injuries, either. We were also able to capture three of them alive.”

The attractive elf she referred to as Alpha nods.

“Leave the rest to the Numbers.”

“Understood.”

“Looks like we have a war on our hands…”

Alpha’s blue eyes flash as she glares at the distant sky.

As fall comes to a close, the night air gradually starts getting cooler.

I listen to the bugs chirp and buzz as I change into a suit in my dorm room. Suits didn’t exist in this world originally, but Mitsugoshi popularized them, and now they’re all the rage among the aristocracy.

My suit, however, isn’t one of Mitsugoshi’s. It’s a copycat product made by the Snow Fox Corporation that Yukime gave me as a present.

Apparently, she manages a legitimate business that operates outside the Lawless City. They’re currently in the middle of expanding their line of Mitsugoshi knockoffs.

That said, Mitsugoshi’s products make full use of all sorts of information I brought over from my original world. Even though Snow Fox is widely recognized as the leading authority on plagiarizing its designs, they’ve only been able to replicate a small fraction of their products.

Mitsugoshi engineering is the best in the world!

This society doesn’t have antitrust laws, but if they did, the way Mitsugoshi’s taking over the marketplace would definitely violate them.

“No wonder the Major Corporate Alliance is pissed at them…”

Honestly, Alpha and the others might have overdone it a bit.

As for me, I’ve got a whole outfit going on. Black suit, striped button-down, thin black tie. My shoes are black straight tips.

I finish the look off by parting my hair to the sides and donning a white mask that covers the top half of my face.

"Heh-heh-heh…"

I feel like an FBI agent.

Slime bodysuits are great—don't get me wrong—and they can't be beat when it comes to functionality. However, I can't let the Shadow Garden girls figure out who I am just yet.

Now then, it's almost time for my meeting with Yukime.

I turn off my room's lamp, leap out the window, and dash off into the night.

My presence is completely erased. Nobody's following me.

After leaving the school grounds and dashing through a forest for about half an hour, I hear a roaring waterfall as I come to a clearing.

In it, there's a mansion nestled right up alongside a mountain stream.

Its name is Descendingwater, and between the forest, the waterfall, and the stream, it's got one hell of an aesthetic.

Apparently, it was designed by some famous architect. Yukime uses it as her secret base.

I see warm light spilling out from a window, and with my presence still erased, I silently slip inside it.

Yukime is sitting on the sofa in front of the fireplace.

Her white hair glows in its light.

My heels click as I walk, and the Spirit Fox turns to me and smiles.

"Once again I fail to sense you coming, Mr. Shadow."

"…I've abandoned that name," I say quietly as I take a seat on the sofa across from Yukime.

"Ah, that's right. Now you're Mr. John Smith."

"Right. That's who I am now…"

For the next little while, I plan on acting as John Smith, Super Elite Agent. I've even changed my tone of voice to sound cooler and more collected.

"My heart becomes warm to know you decided to trust me, Mr. John. Care to drink with me?"

"Don't mind if I do."

As Yukime pours the wine, she makes sure to emphasize her exposed cleavage.

Nice. I love this whole "sexy accomplice from a sketchy organization" vibe she's got going on.

I pretend to enjoy the wine's aroma, then take a sip. For the record, I don't know shit about aroma or flavor when it comes to wine.

"There's profit in it for me. That's all there is to it…"

"Oh my. A relationship built solely on profit? That's far too sad, no?"

"You're no different, are you?"

"I do wonder… Care to test that theory?" Yukime licks her soft, full lips and beams a seductive smile.

“You’re wasting my time.”

“On another occasion, perhaps…”

She straightens up her exposed cleavage a little, then sips her wine. Her lips leave bright red marks on the glass.

“The MCA—the Major Corporate Alliance—held a meeting the other day. Now, they did little more than show up and confirm their mission statement, leaving the specifics of their plan for another day. Alas, from the looks of it, they’re already employing rather vulgar methods. Mitsugoshi might fall faster than expected.”

“…I see.”

“However, our plan remains the same. First, we let Mitsugoshi and the MCA crush each other. Then we make our preparations and wait for our chance—”

“—and then we take it all.”

At the end of the day, Alpha and the others went too far.

The way it sounds, their fate was sealed the moment they went up against the MCA. Yukime says so, and so do all the old guys who run stores in the shopping district.

I mean, it makes sense.

Some rookie kids who’ve been doing business for only a couple years shouldn’t pick fights against legacy corporations with years of experience and history. That’s basic common sense.

There’s only one way for me to save them.

I have to destroy it all, then start from scratch.

Mitsugoshi stood out too much, so everyone and their mother is zeroing in on them. Unfortunately, that means there’s no choice but to hit the reset button.

Mitsugoshi is gonna get crushed by the MCA.

However, Yukime and I are gonna be working behind the scenes to take down the MCA so we can divvy up their assets and the brand-new marketplace.

Then I’ll found a new company and hire Alpha and the others to run it.

In other words, Mitsugoshi will simply be reborn under a different name.

“We’ll need you to do some work to make this all happen. Be very careful,” she warns.

“Be careful…?”

Yukime’s face darkens as she rises to her feet. Then she turns around and unfastens her kimono’s sash.

Fwump.

The firelight illuminates her naked body as her clothes fall to the floor.

Her back…is hideously inflamed.

“The man who did this to me, Gettan the Sword Devil, works for the MCA.”

Her back still pointing my way, Yukime looks at me over her shoulder.

“Gettan is mine. I will verily kill him with my own two hands…”

The crackling of the fire serves as the backdrop to Yukime's grim proclamation.

Then, suddenly, she smiles.

"Hee-hee. Now then, shall we get to our scheming?"

After Yukime puts her kimono back on, her aides Natsu and Kana appear to refasten her sash.

I down the rest of my wine and quietly rise to my feet.

I've got the day off.

At the moment, I'm spending it with Skel and Po. It's been a while since we three NPCs went shopping together like this.

I don't have anything in particular I'm dying for, so I fill up my basket with daily necessities and bring it up to the counter.

"So out of five thousand *zeni*. Are paper bills all right for your change?"

"Uh, sure."

Making sure to add an "uh" before your answer is Background Character 101.

More to the point, it seems like people have started using paper currency recently. The Midgar Kingdom fundamentally runs on a coin-based economy, but bills have made some serious inroads.

Now, paper money isn't really money. Technically, it's more like a voucher that can be exchanged for actual currency.

Because of that, there are plenty of stores that won't take them, and plenty of people who don't trust them. It's considered polite to ask permission before attempting to use them.

Having taken my change and finished the transaction, I head outside and casually look over the bill.

"Huh…?"

I only just noticed it, but why is the design different from other thousand-*zeni* bills?

Seeing me suddenly stop, Po calls out to me. "What's wrong, Cid?"

"Did thousand-*zeni* bills always look like this?"

"What are you talking about? That's one of the new bills the MCA just put out. Do you not know why we're out shopping today?"

"Whaddaya mean?"

"Today's the big sale commemorating the MCA releasing their new bills, remember?"

"Oh, right. Right right right."

Was that it?

"C'mon, Cid, get your head in the game."

I see. They're holding a blowout to entice people to use their new bills.

Wait a sec.

If the MCA only just put out their bills, where did all the paper money we've been using before come from?

Now I'm kinda interested, so I reach into my wallet and pull out one of the older bills to take a look—and discover a shocking truth!

"The *hell*?"

I can't stop myself from yelping.

"Wh-what's wrong, Cid?!"

"Hey, Cid, what's up?"

"Why the hell does this have 'Mitsugoshi Bank' written on it?"

I can see the words on the edge of the bill clear as day: Mitsugoshi Bank.

What the hell is Mitsugoshi Bank?!

Don't tell me Alpha and the others started a bank, too?!

"'Cause it's a deposit receipt from Mitsugoshi Bank. Duh."

"Mitsugoshi Bank was the first one to start making paper money, remember? If you use them at Mitsugoshi shops, you get freebies and discounts and stuff."

"Ah, now that you mention it…"

Back at the beginning, Mitsugoshi stores were the only places you could spend paper money. I'd always thought that was weird, as well as the fact that they gave you discounts for doing so, but now I guess I know why.

So they started a bank and kept it a secret from me, huh?

Wait, did they?

Actually, now that I think about it, I do remember that one time…

A couple years ago, everyone would praise me and go, "Master Shadow, you're a genius!" whenever I told them random trivia from my old world, so I'd get carried away and tell them about all kinds of stuff. I think I might have mentioned something about banks and credit creation back then.

I watched a two-hour MBO documentary on credit creation once, so even though I only vaguely remembered it, I was able to yammer on for a decent while.

About halfway through, though, the look in everyone's eyes started scaring me, and my recollection of the documentary started getting really sketchy, so I cut the explanation short by going, "Figure out the rest for yourselves." After that, I think they were pretty pumped up about the idea of starting a bank themselves.

Oh god, were they actually *serious*?

Is the word *restraint* in *any* of their vocabularies?

Honestly, that was probably what set off the anti-Mitsugoshi faction.

"That's why the MCA's putting out paper money, too, huh…?"

If they hadn't, Mitsugoshi would have run off with the ball. They didn't have much of a choice.

The question then becomes How well does the MCA understand just how dangerous money creation can be?

The time has come for me to wield the knowledge imparted in me by that two-hour MBO documentary.

“Heh-heh-heh… The question is, *How well do they…? Just how dangerous…?* Heh-heh-heh…”

“What’s he babbling about over there?”

“He’s probably just stressed out. I can’t imagine his life’s going all that great, after all.”

When I take the simple-yet-elaborate Mitsugoshi Bank bill and compare it side by side with the flashy-yet-sloppy MCA bill, I notice something.

Wait, is this…?

The Mitsugoshi Bank bill has a serial number and a watermark.

The MCA bill has a serial number, too, but it’s missing a watermark. And its design isn’t that detailed, either.

If someone were to make counterfeits, getting rich off them would be piece of cake.

I don’t have the means to manufacture them on my own.

However, what I *do* have is a reliable accomplice who operates on the shady side of the law.

Oh, I can work with this. I can work with this indeed.

“Skel, Po, I’m on the verge of obtaining *everything*.”

“What are you talking about, man…?”

“Cid, did you hit your head…?”

Turn, O cranial gears of mine!

As for you, two-hour MBO documentary, I’m counting on you!!

As Yukime gazes at the hearth and sips her wine, she feels wind blowing in from somewhere.

When she turns around, she finds that the window’s open. She hears a sound like a finger flicking metal.

“Mr. John, pray tell, is that you…?”

Her question is answered when a suit-clad man emerges from the darkness.

His physique is well-balanced, and his face sports a white mask and an intrepid smile.

He takes a seat across from Yukime, toying with the coin in his hand and flipping it into the air.

“This single gold coin can double many times over. All on the back of the fickle, phantasmal power called credit…”

His voice is low and resonant.

Yukime senses he’s talking about the bills that have recently begun circulating.

“The slips of paper that the masses think of as currency aren’t technically money at all. In truth, they’re deposit slips. Tickets that can be exchanged to retrieve money you’ve lent the bank, nothing more. When

Mitsugoshi Bank turned theirs out into the world, they also gave them the power to settle accounts—in other words, they made it so the deposit slips could be used for transactions. In the capital, it's fully possible to exchange ten thousand *zeni*' worth of deposit slips for ten thousand *zeni*' worth of goods. And anyone can then take those slips to Mitsugoshi Bank and liquidate them. As a consequence, the people have come to believe the slips of paper have the same value as actual money…"

He takes out two slips of paper and places them atop the desk. One is a Mitsugoshi Bank bill; the other is one of the MCA's.

"But do they really? Let's say, hypothetically, that someone deposits ten thousand *zeni* with Mitsugoshi Bank. Mitsugoshi will then issue the depositor a ten thousand–*zeni* bill, and they'll go off and spend it during their daily shopping. But something strange happens here. There's the ten thousand stored at the bank, and the ten thousand making the rounds through the marketplace. We started out with a single ten thousand–*zeni* coin, but all of a sudden there's twenty thousand *zeni* floating around."

Yukime considers the fact that Mitsugoshi Bank got the people to believe that their deposit slips were just as good as money to be their magnum opus.

Thanks to that, they've gained the ability to inflate a single coin's value countless times over.

"Now, if all the bank did was let the original ten thousand *zeni* sit quietly in their vault, there wouldn't be a problem. Even if the money in the system still technically doubled, the amount out in the marketplace is still just ten thousand *zeni*, so no contradiction is born. However, Mitsugoshi's been using the ten thousand *zeni* in their vault as collateral to issue yet another ten thousand–*zeni* bill and lend it out."

Not many people actually withdraw their money from banks, especially not when paper money is so convenient and easy to spend. Nobody wants to walk around with a heavy sack of gold coins jangling around, after all.

Furthermore, Mitsugoshi is incentivized to cash in on the capital's prosperity.

There's no end to the people who want to take out loans to start up businesses, so Mitsugoshi's bills are practically spreading faster than they can print them.

"The ten thousand *zeni* in their vault multiplies countless times over, and thanks to the capital's economic boom, Mitsugoshi Bank gets to rake in the interest. Such is the power of credit creation…"

Credit creation. It's exactly what it says on the can.

Mitsugoshi Bank's leader might well be the greatest con artist the world has ever seen.

Yukime doesn't know who exactly was audacious and crafty enough to come up with such a scheme, but she'd love to get a chance to sit down and chat with them.

“But are these slips of paper really as valuable as the people believe they are…?”

If John’s story got out to the masses, they’d be shocked.

Of course, it’s probably common knowledge among the MCA’s leadership.

After all, they’re the ones who’re scrutinizing Mitsugoshi’s every move.

It’s no surprise John was able to figure it out as well, but why did he bring it up? Yukime thinks it over.

“Here are two bills. One is Mitsugoshi’s; the other is the MCA’s. Notice anything…?”

“My. Is there something to notice…?”

Yukime’s eyes look like pools of clear water as she compares the two notes. The designs are different, of course, but she doubts that that’s what he’s hinting at.

In that case…

“One has a watermark, while the other does not?”

“Exactly. Also, the MCA’s design is more simplistic. Do you know what that means…?”

“It’s easier to make counterfeits. That’s—”

“Exactly. We could make a killing.”

“Yes…” Yukime tilts her head to the side.

Making counterfeits is an idea even a child could come up with.

Yukime’s certainly considered the possibility, and the MCA doubtless has as well.

“Mr. John, the MCA’s bills have yet to circulate outside the capital. If counterfeits were to appear, their source would be found instantly.”

John freezes in place.

“A small-scale operation might be possible, but the profits would be correspondingly minor, mind you. However, anything larger than that would be shut down expeditiously.”

Given the small area the bills are currently being circulated in, it would be an easy job to track down where any counterfeits came from.

In other words, starting a large-scale operation would just be asking for trouble. While a small-scale operation wouldn’t be a problem, Yukime doubts anyone would be stupid enough to pick a fight with the MCA.

More important, doing so would let Mitsugoshi run unchecked. And that was a dangerous proposition.

At this rate, Mitsugoshi was liable to gain a complete stranglehold on all commercial and banking operations.

“Um… Mr. John…?”

John’s shoulders are slumped dejectedly.

He looks like a child who, upon asking a friend to go treasure hunting with him, was given the perfectly logical response that there was no treasure to be found.

He wasn’t seriously planning on making counterfeits, was he?

Yukime smiles. It seems the man has a cute side to him, too.

But the next moment, she feels something pressing against her body.

John's shoulders are still slumped, but he's emanating waves of raw power.

"Wha—?!"

"Is that…really what you believe…?"

His voice sounds like it's resonating up from the void.

What's with this insane force?

It's not even magic. It's like his willpower given form—

It's almost as though he's saying Yukime's judgment was flawed.

He's testing her. To see whether or not she's fit to be his partner…!

But still… What was it she overlooked?

Yukime thinks back over their exchange.

Then she realizes something.

"Ah—"

If, hypothetically, they managed to introduce a huge number of counterfeits into circulation…then the MCA's credit system would crumble.

Once the people harbored suspicions about the MCA's bills, they'd probably go in droves to trade them back for official coinage. However, due to the MCA's credit creation, they'll have issued many times more value in bills than they have cash on hand. They won't be able to cover all the exchanges.

The MCA's paper currency will become little more than scraps of paper.

In other words…

"You would have us introduce vast amounts of counterfeits into circulation to intentionally trigger this credit crisis?!"

The shorter the time before the MCA went bankrupt, the lower the risk of them getting caught.

Better yet, Yukime has access to the perfect front—the Lawless City.

If they circulate the currency through the Lawless City, it'll take the investigators that much longer to pin down where the counterfeits are coming from.

By the time the MCA figures out the truth, it'll be too late.

To think John thought all that through.

Yukime finally realizes why he slumped his shoulders a moment ago.

He'd been disappointed in her…for not realizing the true significance of the counterfeits. He'd tested her.

He definitely hadn't proposed making counterfeits on some idle whim.

It had been a calculated decree. He'd left nothing to chance.

A moment ago, he'd said, "But are these slips of paper really as valuable as the people believe they are…?"

He'd been hinting at the possibility of a credit crisis.

"All we must do is send them to bankruptcy before they find us… What an audacious plan."

To think that a simple counterfeiting operation could have such a profound significance…

Everything he'd said had been foreshadowing this.

Cold sweat runs down Yukime's back in the face of John's sheer ingenuity.

It doesn't end there.

"Is that…really what you believe—?"

"Wha—?!!"

The aura radiating from John intensifies.

Has she overlooked something else?! Yukime frantically racks her brain, but she comes up blank.

John's eyes peer at her from beneath his mask, scoping her out.

This is bad! This is bad! This is bad—!

"…It is," Yukime quietly murmurs.

She looks down.

The plan is airtight, so that's the only answer she can give…

Lamenting her own incompetence, she awaits her judgment. However… John's pressure dissipates.

"—Exactly."

"Huh…?"

I-it was a trick—! If she'd given in to his pressure and spouted some nonsense, he would have condemned her.

Standing by her answer had been the right move.

The final thing he'd been testing had been her honesty.

Having understood all that, she goes weak in the knees and collapses backward into the sofa.

"Then counterfeits it is. It's a much sounder plan than my original one. I will handle the production and distribution. When they join circulation, the MCA will open an investigation. I trust you can make sure it fails."

"That I can."

"Magnificent. We can deal with the rest of the details another day."

"…Very well." John flips his coin into the air.

It spins, then lands with a *clink*.

By the time it does, John's already gone. All that remains of him is a cool evening breeze.

The fallen coin rolls along the ground and comes to a stop by Yukime's foot. She picks it up and flips it the same way he did.

"John Smith… The man once called Shadow…"

What unbelievable ingenuity.

What unbelievable grit.

What unbelievable strength.

"Truly, he is a giant among men…"

Yukime lets out a heavy sigh.

Originally, she wanted to win him over for his strength alone, but the man is blessed with far more than just martial prowess. He possesses

resourcefulness in equal measure, as well as the fortitude of will necessary to wield them both.

Now that I have Yukime's seal of approval on the counterfeiting plan, there's nothing left for me to do but wait for her to print the fake bills.

Once that happens, my job'll be taking out enemy spies so they can't figure out where the counterfeits are coming from.

Heh…

The scenario is thus—as Mitsugoshi and the MCA wage war out in the open, a mysterious man betrays his organization and pulls strings from behind the scenes so he can carry out his mission alone.

Counterfeits will circulate, the MCA will fall, and once all the dust has settled, his true objective will come to light—saving his original organization.

"…That's what it means to be a Super Elite Agent."

It's badass as hell, if I do say so myself.

I'm a Super Elite Agent who must betray his organization in order to save it.

If Alpha and the others figure out who I am, everything will have been for nothing. That means I can't use my sword. Because my sword isn't part of my core aesthetic anymore, that means I can try out all sorts of cool new fighting styles.

As I'm mulling over my options and walking down the darkened capital streets, I spot a familiar pair of dog ears off in the distance.

"Delta…?"

The moment I murmur the name under my breath, the ears twitch.

She turns around. That's Delta, all right.

"…Boss man," she mouths.

Then she immediately drops to all fours and bounds all the way over to me.

That's Delta for you. She's always been stupidly fast. A normal person wouldn't have even been able to see her.

"Boss m—!"

"I'm not 'Boss man' right now."

"Oh-woof… Cid! I missed you!" Her tail wags excitedly.

However, her beaming grin quickly stiffens.

"Cid… You smell like fox…"

Her sense of smell is stupidly strong, too.

"Uh, I was off foxhunting."

"I wanna hunt foxes!"

Her face brightens up again.

"Sorry, but the foxes are all hunted up."

“Oh-woof… Next time, then!”

“Yeah, for sure. Oh, and quit marking me with your scent.”

Delta’s rubbing herself all over me, so I’m forced to manually pry her off.

“But Cid, you stink of fox.”

“It’s fine.”

“No!” Delta keeps coming at me, and it takes a good deal of effort to keep her off.

I decide to change the subject.

“So, Delta, what are you doing in the capital?”

“Oh-woof… Cid, you’re too strong.”

“So, Delta, what are you doing in the capital?”

“Hmm? What?”

“So, Delta, what are you doing in the capital?”

“Uh, well, see, I woke up this morning, ate some meat, and came to the capital.”

“So, Delta, what are you doing in the capital?”

“Uh, well, see, I was hunting!”

“In the capital?”

“Outside the capital. It was fun! I hunted a bunch! Cid, wanna join?”

“Why were you hunting?”

“Come hunt with me!”

“Why were you hunting?”

“Alpha told me to! Cid, come hunt with me!”

“Oh, it was Alpha’s idea.”

“Yeah! Cid, come hunt with me!”

“What were you hunting?”

“Bandits! Cid, come hunt with me!”

“A bandit hunt, huh?”

“Cid, you love bandit hunting!”

“That’s true. I *do* love bandit hunting.”

“Come hunt with me!”

“All right, I’m sold. It’s not like I’m doing anything.”

“Hooray!!” Delta grabs me by the hand and starts trying to drag me off.

“Hey, hold up! I can’t leave right now. I gotta head back to the dorms first.”

“No!”

“Also, didn’t you have some business you had to deal with here in the capital?”

“Business?”

“I assume Alpha called for you or something.”

“A-Alpha?!”

“Did you forget?”

“She called me! Is she gonna get mad?!”

“I dunno. But you’d better go quick.”

“But the bandit hunt…” Delta looks at me dejectedly.

“I’ll be free for a while, so why don’t we just go tomorrow? Go take care of your business.”

“Got it! Cid, make sure you wait for me!!”

“I’ll be there at the dorm. Make sure you come inconspicuously, though.”

“I’ll come undercover!”

Delta drops back to all fours and dashes off through the capital at a breakneck pace.

If anyone saw her, she’d definitely turn heads, but normal people can’t make her out at those speeds, so maybe it’s fine.

For some reason, I’m reminded of the golden retriever I had back in my old world. I let out a quiet sigh.

We race through the forest in the dead of night.

I’m following close behind Delta.

I was worried about how well she’d be able to follow my instructions, but she managed to show up at my dorm without causing a scene or anything.

Of course, her abilities are the one thing I never have to worry about. Hunting is Delta’s specialty. When I see the way she conceals her presence, I’m honestly impressed. She might well be the cream of the Seven Shadows’ crop.

What’s more, her ability to sense prey is off the charts. To be honest, her sense of smell and hearing are probably even better than mine. No matter how much I try out some extreme body mods and boost myself with magic, the difference between species is too wide to overcome.

With the notable exception of her brains, every aspect of Delta’s is top-of-the-line.

That’s the reason I’m having her run ahead of me and act as my Bandit Radar.

When it comes to hunting outlaws, finding the first one is always the hardest and most time-consuming bit. With Delta running in front of me, all I have to do is follow after her and let her lead me to the good part.

Her nose twitches and her tail wags as she races forward.

Looks like we’ve got a hit.

She speeds up, dropping from two legs to four. She rips through the forest at blistering speeds, eventually charging straight toward a light barely visible off in the distance.

Screams fill the air.

When I get there a second later, I find several of the bandits already dead, their limbs strewn around the campfire.

Yeah, I had a feeling this would happen.

Going on bandit hunts with Delta isn't all sunshine and rainbows. There are downsides, too. Notably, she loses the ability to wait the moment she spots her prey.

With her, bandit hunts have a habit of ending up as one-sided massacres. And where's the fun in that?

Man, everything was shaping up to be a such a blast, too…

Now, strictly speaking, it's not that she *can't* wait. If I told her to, she'd probably follow my instructions.

However, doing so causes her immense stress.

She'll behave herself as long as I'm around, but the minute I'm gone, she'll have no choice but to vent it. That invariably causes problems.

She might end up mounting Gamma to assert dominance, or chop down all the trees behind someone's house and leave the lot barren, or find a vegetable field and eat everything in it…

Back when she was a kid, it stopped there. Now that she's grown up, though, I have no idea how destructive her stress-relieving methods might be. And I have no desire to find out.

As I stand there thinking, the hunt more or less comes to an end.

I barely even got to do anything.

"P-please, wait!"

The final bandit begins begging for his life.

It happens a lot, but the pleading never works on Delta.

A carnivorous grin spreads across her face as she swings her ebony blade with all her might.

There isn't a shred of technique behind the blow, but it makes up for it with raw power. However, it isn't just fast, but flowing and clean as well.

I guess that's talent for you, huh?

Her sword barrels at the bandit's neck, slices through the top layer of skin, then comes to a halt.

"Huh?"

Has Delta stopped…?

Impossible.

She sniffs, taking in the bandit's scent.

"I—I knew it was you, Sara. Look, it's me! It's me!" says the outlaw.

As he repeats "It's me, it's me" over and over like a scammer, the bandit takes off his mask.

His features are rough and masculine, but they aren't nearly as eye-catching as the fact that he has dog ears the same color and shape as Delta's.

"That is *you*, right, Sara? It's me, your older brother!"

Delta sniffs again, then tilts her head to the side and looks my way.

It's a sign she's asking for permission.

I nod, giving her the go-ahead to do whatever she wants.

"You smell like Dad…but I don't remember you."

Delta takes off her mask as well. Her face and tail come into view.

“Well, if it isn’t Sara. I’d heard you contracted the possession and the old man hunted you down, but…I guess you survived. Good going.”

“I’m the best at hide-and-seek, or my name isn’t Delta.”

“Delta? So that’s what you call yourself these days, huh? Hey, c’mon, let me live. I *am* your brother, after all.”

The man looks at Delta, clearly trying to butter her up.

Her tail puffs up menacingly. Oh, man. That’s a sign she’s unhappy.

“A weakling is no brother of mine.”

“Hey, hey-hey-hey-hey-hey, you’ve always been strong, and I know I can’t beat you! Even Dad always said if you weren’t a woman, he would have appointed you as the next chief! Your possession is all better, right? Why don’t I go talk to Dad and get him to let you come home? Whaddaya say?”

“If I wanted to go back, I’d do it myself.”

“Yeah, yeah-yeah-yeah, of course! That’s just how you are! In that case, what if I introduce you to a master befitting your skills! Listen and be amazed—right now, I’m working for Gettan the legendary Great Wolf!”

Delta’s tail begins to swish. It’s a sign she’s outright pissed.

“Gettan… You heard of this guy?” I ask her.

“Don’t know him.” She shakes her head, her expression stern. Yup, figures.

“You’re kidding!! He’s the legendary Great Wolf, the one even Dad couldn’t beat! The strongest swordsman in all the wolf clans! I—I bet you could even get chosen as one of his lovers, and—”

“Don’t care; shut up. Weaklings should just be quiet.”

With that, Delta lops the man’s head off mid-sentence. His head flies in a clean arc through the air.

“Uh… Wasn’t that your brother?”

Her face looks downright livid as she glowers at the man’s severed head, but when she looks over at me, she wags her tail, all smiles.

“Weaklings are a stain on the family name. I’m glad I got to put him down.”

“I…see.”

There’s nothing else I can really say. I guess humans and therianthropes just see the matter in fundamentally different ways.

Therianthropes are a pretty diverse species, but something like 80 percent of them are of the opinion that “might makes right.” The strong are kings, and those who are good at hunting are respected, too, albeit not quite as much. In that regard, Delta’s an archetypical example of the stereotype, to the point where it’s like, “Oh man, settle down; we get it, you’re a therianthrope.”

However, even though they don’t all take it to extent Delta does, her way of thinking is pretty standard. To put it bluntly, therianthropes’ base stats are overpowered as hell. Their physical abilities are high, their senses are sharp, their reflexes are great, their magic is plentiful, they live long lives,

and they reproduce like rabbits. If it weren't for their intellectual shortcomings, they'd have easily taken over the world by now.

Because of their "might makes right" philosophy, every time their population goes up, they start infighting, and it goes right back down again. Occasionally, some grand therianthrope hero will show up and unite them, but they invariably end up picking a fight with the humans or the elves and get sent scurrying back. Wait…this is the therianthropes we're talking about. They crush their opposition every time. What *actually* happens is that they extend their supply lines too far, their provisions can't make it to the front lines, and they get hungry and head home. Every goddamn time. Still, that's not to say there aren't wise and clever ones, too. For better or for worse, they're a diverse people. For example, the fox clans are famous for their intellect. Just look at Yukime.

Man, if only they'd just turn to the smarter clans and listen to them for a change. Actually, they do listen to them at first, but as soon as the supply lines get stretched out and the smart therianthropes tell them to play it safe, the meatheads call them cowards and push on anyway.

Apparently, they're all "might makes right" when it comes to their instincts, too.

They do ostensibly have a constitutional government, and they've made some forays into industry recently, but they haven't had much success. I guess their brains are too full, thinking of raw power.

"Still, you should try to at least recognize your siblings. That can't possibly be too much to ask."

"Um, my dad has around twenty lovers. I have over a hundred brothers!"

"Oh. Well, in that case, you can definitely stand to lose one or two."

That's therianthropes for you. They operate on crazy scales. Still, I'm kind of interested in this country of "might makes right."

"You know, I kinda want to check out the therianthrope lands at some point."

Delta's ears twitch. "Ooh, good idea! You can become chief, Boss man!!"

"Huh?"

"You can beat up the old one, then become chief of the new pack!"

"Uh…"

"Then you can make lots of babies and become the strongest family in the world!!"

"Yeah, that's definitely not on the agenda."

"It is! We'll find you a thousand women!! You can make lots of babies, the strongest in the world!! Let's go!! You can become a big hero, then take over the world!!"

"That's not happening. C'mon, we're heading back to the capital."

"No!!"

"Yes."

"Boooooo!!"

I drag Delta back to the capital. This is giving me a headache.

The Eminence in Shadow

onestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as
g as I can remember.
s it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
stermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
aracters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role
hind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
airs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
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nk of children who worship their favorite superheroes.

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All I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as
long as I can remember.
Was it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
Eh, I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
mastermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
characters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role
behind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
I wanted to be one of them.
Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

Printing Fake Money as Mitsugoshi Throws Down with the Major Corporate Alliance!

The Eminence in Shadow
Volume 3

Chapter 5

Chapter 5

Printing Fake Money as Mitsugoshi Throws Down with the Major Corporate Alliance!

The gorgeous room has two men in it.

One is a human merchant so rotund, he looks like a frog. The other is a blind therianthrope.

“One of the Clovers was killed? Is that what you’re telling me?” the therianthrope growls. His jet-black fur is sleek, and his wolfman features are rough and masculine. Each of his eyelids closes over his empty sockets and bears a deep sword wound.

“The man we lost was the newest Clover, the therianthrope who’d caught your attention, Mr. Gettan. His camp was raided while he was preparing to masquerade as a bandit and attack Mitsugoshi’s carriages.”

The rotund merchant keeps a close eye on Gettan’s expression as he relays the news.

The Clovers are the four most capable members of the Garter Corporation’s personal army. They’re all handpicked by Gettan himself.

“And now he’s dead… Whose work was this, Garter?”

“It’s unclear. The corpse was decapitated with a single blow to the head. It certainly wasn’t the work of an amateur. Given our current situation, we suspect Mitsugoshi has hired some dark knights…”

The frog-like man is Garter, president of the Garter Corporation.

Although Garter is the president and Gettan is one of his employees, you’d never guess it from the way they interact with each other.

“Those Mitsugoshi bastards… They’re tough, I’ll give them that.”

Gettan’s murmur is low, like a wolf snarling.

Their public efforts to crush Mitsugoshi should have been going well.

Thanks to the work their private army’s been doing while disguised as bandits, all the traveling salesmen have stopped carrying Mitsugoshi goods and using their bills. Instead, they’ve all switched over to MCA merchandise and currency.

Furthermore, the MCA’s paper money is becoming popular, right on schedule.

Yet for whatever reason, Mitsugoshi isn’t flinching.

The Garter Corporation hasn’t been attacking only traveling salesmen, but Mitsugoshi cargo carriages, too. However, the competitor must have some formidable guards on their payroll.

Not a single member of Garter’s attack force has come back alive.

In other words, Mitsugoshi’s urban trade has been completely unaffected. The only ones who’ve been suffering are the traveling salesmen who used to carry their goods to the commoners out in the countryside.

However, rural commerce doesn’t even begin to compare with its urban counterpart when it comes to scale.

After all, cities are where the rich and powerful gather. And those are the kinds of people who can not only afford luxury goods but buy them by the cartload.

Most rural families, on the other hand, are just simple farmers.

Farmers tend to be self-sufficient when it comes to food. Whenever they find themselves in need of something, they prefer to make it on their own, not spending money unless it’s absolutely necessary. Many of them are in the habit of buying things only when the traveling salesmen make their monthly rounds.

Mitsugoshi’s been trying to change that habit by selling high-quality goods at bargain prices out in the countryside, but that’s still a work in progress.

Even though their rural sales are currently stagnating, it isn’t so much as making a dent in their bottom line.

That just goes to show how strong a foundation they’ve built with their urban stores.

“Tch…” Gettan clicks his tongue, feigning irritation.

The merchants of the MCA had looked down on Mitsugoshi. They’d thought that crushing them would be a breeze.

At this rate, though, Mitsugoshi might not go down at all.

The more time goes on, the more resources the MCA is burning.

Gettan controls the Garter Corporation, so he needs to at least pretend to be flustered.

“Gather the rest of the Clovers and conduct a raid on Mitsugoshi’s headquarters.”

“As you wish.”

“Make sure you get all their money and manufacturing details. Failure will not be tolerated.”

Garter bows silently, then practically flees the room in his hurry to leave.

The way Gettan turns his head to follow him, it’s almost as though his shut eyes can really see.

“Excellent…”

Now alone, Gettan bares his fangs in a toothy smile.

His job is to destroy Mitsugoshi. That’s why he’s taken over the Garter Corporation.

However, unlike the MCA merchants, he knows they won't go down without a fight. That's why the Cult has decided they need to be eliminated.

Word came down from the Cult's top brass: Mitsugoshi is growing faster than they'd predicted, and if they keep expanding at this rate, there's a chance they'll end up posing a problem.

The Cult already has their hands full just dealing with Shadow Garden. If they let a new hindrance rise up now, it could prove an impediment to their future plans.

"Heh-heh-heh…"

Mitsugoshi is powerful enough, even the Cult regards them as a threat.

There was no way the MCA companies were going to be able to deal with them, even after they all joined forces.

As far as Gettan is concerned, the MCA is nothing more than a sacrificial pawn. And because he's willing to abandon the MCA to do it, crushing Mitsugoshi will be a cinch.

The only reason he volunteered for this job was because he had the utmost confidence in his ability to pull it off.

"I've already made it this far…"

He's at the point where getting a seat on the Rounds isn't a pipe dream.

Just a little more…

"…"

The wounds over his eyes ache.

He presses down on them with one hand and grimaces.

He received them many moons ago, but even though they've long since healed, they still remind him of his past failures.

"…!"

He murmurs something under his breath.

A memory of his life's first black stain.

He grinds his fangs.

Rain cascades over the night. As the moon hides behind the clouds, the sound of droplets hitting the ground echoes in from outside.

Two elves sit on a couch on Mitsugoshi's first floor.

"Alpha, the bodyguards have been able to completely repel the MCA's attacks on our carriages. In fact, because we've successfully killed all the assassins they sent, we're gradually whittling down their combat assets."

The indigo-haired elf with deep blue eyes—Gamma—looks over some documents as she speaks.

"Sounds like there aren't any problems on that front," Alpha replies. The light from the fireplace makes her platinum blond hair glow.

"We have the superior market share, too. All we need to do is keep counterattacking and the MCA will gradually fall."

“Thank goodness for that. We don’t want the connection between Mitsugoshi and Shadow Garden to become public, so we need to avoid making any overt moves…”

Then there’s a knock on the door.

“Come in.”

“Forgive the intrusion.”

Their guest is Nu, a woman with dark brown hair.

“I’m sorry to interrupt you in the middle of your conversation, but we have intruders on the premises.”

“…It would seem they’re looking to pick a fight.”

Gamma stands up from the couch, her face radiating confidence. “I’ll handle it.”

“I, um, I suppose that’s fine, but…are you sure?”

“Absolutely. I’ll go show them what we’re made of. Nu, follow me.”

“Roger that.”

The two of them bow, then leave. Alpha uneasily watches them go.

“Well, Nu’s with her, so she *should* be okay…,” the elf says with a nod, trying to convince herself that it’s true.

As the man clad in black dashes through the dark corridor, the sound of rain drowns out his already-quiet footsteps.

The nimble man’s identity is Leaf One, a powerful dark knight and the leader of the Clovers.

He, along with Leaf Two and Leaf Three, are in the middle of conducting a raid on Mitsugoshi’s headquarters. His job is to break off from the group and gather up confidential documents solo. Meanwhile, Leaf Two and his men will be engaging in sabotage, while Leaf Three will be pillaging as well as kidnapping important personnel.

As Leaf One heads deeper into the company’s bowels, he notices a figure walking his way. He stops in his tracks.

He recognizes that indigo-haired elf walking through the dark hallway. It’s Mitsugoshi’s president.

Leaf Three is supposed to be the one in charge of kidnapping, but…eh, whatever. Leaf One decides to prioritize knocking the woman out and capturing her.

He moves swiftly.

After silently coming up behind the target, he levels a knife-hand strike at her neck.

“Ow!” she yelps.

“Huh?”

She whirls around, eyes wide.

Leaf One hurriedly puts some distance between them. He definitely caught her by surprise, so why isn't she knocked out?

"That hurts! But catching *me* by surprise… Impressive."

She rubs her neck and flashes a fearless smile. Although she's complaining about the pain, she doesn't seem to have suffered any meaningful damage.

"I see you went to great lengths to get here, so I would be remiss not to offer you a welcome befitting your efforts. My name is Gamma. And I'll be the one to end your life!!"

With that declaration, Gamma draws her ebony blade.

Then she reinforces her body and closes the distance between them in a flash.

She's fast!!

Crazy, stupid fast.

However, that brief instant is all Leaf One needs to get a read on her.

This woman is fast—but she's a complete amateur!!

Her movements are sloppy, and her form is all over the place.

"Fwoosh!!" she cries as she swings her sword.

She puts way too much strength into it, and she has wasted movements all over the place.

Even so, the swing is like lightning—and what's with that insane amount of magic?!

It doesn't matter how fast it is, any attack with such exaggerated and predictable movements can be easily countered. However, Gamma's sword has enough magic packed into it to blow away dozens of dark knights with ease.

One touch of that thing would be lethal.

Leaf One makes sure to give the oncoming assault a gigantic berth.

"That was some fine work, dodging my attack," she commends. "Given those elegant movements of yours, I take it you're a practitioner of the Western Liechtenroi style of fencing?"

"Wha—?!"

She can tell?!

Being able to identify someone's fighting style in just a glance requires incredible powers of observation. Clearly, this woman is no amateur.

Either that, or she just got lucky. Leaf One isn't sure.

"Now that I know your style, countering it is easy. Here I come."

"—!" Leaf One puts up his guard.

"Fwoosh!!" shouts Gamma as she charges at him.

Just as before, she's insanely fast, but because of how clumsy her footwork is, it's surprisingly easy to track her.

She releases another powerful strike.

"Wha—?!"

There's only one way to describe the attack—it's the exact same as the last one?!

She said she figured out his style, but her attack didn't change a bit!!

Leaf One's reflexes take over. He slices at Gamma's neck.

But…

"Ow!"

"Huh?"

She doesn't suffer so much as a scratch.

He hit her neck; he's sure of it. So why? What the hell is going on with this woman's body?!

Leaf One's voice shakes. "Who in the blazes…"

"For you to have landed an attack on me, you must truly be a master. Very well. Then I shall bring my full strength to bear against you."

Gamma packs even more magic into her sword.

"Fwoosh, fwoosh, fwoosh!"

…She swings it repeatedly.

It's fast, but the attacks are so obvious!!

Leaf One falls back and dodges the blows.

"Fwoosh, fwoosh, fwoosh!!"

Gamma continues to pursue him with her unreasonable speed.

"Wh-what's with that insane amount of magic?! And what's with that absurd shout?!"

"It's a trick my magnificent master taught me!! He told me to infuse my sword with a bunch of magic, then slash! He also told me that if I shouted 'fwoosh' while I'm attacking, it'll look more powerful!! Fwoosh, fwoosh, fwoosh!!"

"D-dammit!!"

Overwhelmed by the pressure from Gamma's attacks, Leaf One stumbles.

A fatal opening.

"Gotcha!"

She got him!

Their thoughts align.

However, reality doesn't.

"Plergh?!" Gamma yelps as she trips and falls over nothing. Unable to kill her momentum, she does a corkscrew spin right through the wall.

Crash!!

The tremendous bang echoes throughout the corridor.

"Oww… Not bad."

When Leaf One sees Gamma emerge from the wall unscathed and brush the rubble off her shoulders, he shudders.

Wh-what is this woman *made* of?!

"So you saw me take a big swing, then took advantage of that brief opening to sweep my legs out from under me and used aikido to against me to throw me into the wall. Am I right?"

"N-no? You kinda just tripped on your own…"

"Please. Your cheap lies won't work on me."

This is useless. There's no point trying to reason with this woman.

Wait a minute, *this* insane chick is Mitsugoshi's *president*?!

It's okay, though. Leaf Two and Leaf Three will finish up their tasks soon. Even this madwoman will be powerless before a numbers advantage. As the thought crosses Leaf One's mind, he hears footsteps behind him.

They're here!

"You got here right on time, Leaf Two, Leaf Three… Wha—?!"

The person standing there is neither Leaf Two nor Leaf Three.

It's a woman with a faint smile dancing at her lips. Her dark brown hair bobs as she walks. In her hands, she's holding two lumps…

"When you say Leaf Two and Leaf Three, do you mean—these?"

The woman tosses the two lumps to the ground.

They roll toward Leaf One and come to a stop by his feet. It's a pair of freshly severed heads. And they're still warm.

"Wha… Leaf Two, Leaf Three…?"

Without a doubt, they're the heads of his fellow Clovers.

When he glances at the woman who killed them, she doesn't look like anything more than a simple Mitsugoshi employee.

Leaf One begins sensing there's more to Mitsugoshi than meets the eye.

"Oh my, Nu, you got done rather quickly."

"*D-did* I…?"

"But watch out. That man is undoubtably one of the world's greatest masters…"

"Wait…really?"

The woman named Nu looks at Leaf One. Ninety percent of what fills her gaze is doubt.

It's like her eyes are shouting, So what? You think you're strong or something? at him.

That inscrutable brown-haired woman scares Leaf One. Realizing immediately that she's out of his league, he shakes his head.

"…The man himself is denying it," Nu observes.

"Don't let him fool you. He's a master of the Western Liechtenroi style and an expert in aikido, to boot."

"Really. Well now, that's something I *have* to see…" Nu draws her sword.

O-oh no!

Leaf One instinctively charges at Gamma. Given a choice between the enigma guarding the exit in front of him and the dragon guarding his rear, he'll choose the one in front any day.

"All right, let's settle this! Fwoosh!!" Gamma swings her sword.

However, Leaf One can read her like a book. He stops right outside her attack range, then gets ready to launch a counterattack.

The plan was perfect.

"Plergh?!"

If only she hadn't tripped.

“Huh?”

Unfortunately for him, Gamma stumbling causes her to lose her grip on her sword. It goes spinning toward him at full speed, then slices him clean in two.

As the sword continues whizzing through the air, Leaf One’s body crumples to the ground.

“Oh no… Now I’ve done it.”

Gamma then looks up and surveys the situation. A complicated expression spreads across her face as she locks eyes with Nu.

“Uh…Hidden Technique: ‘Desperation Discus’…!!”

It’s the only way she can think of to save face.

“G-good going there, Gamma!!”

Luckily for her, she’s blessed with an understanding subordinate.

Dry clapping fills the air as the last of Leaf One’s consciousness fades away.

“The Clovers haven’t come back? Is that what you’re telling me?”

Upon hearing the news, Gettan crosses his arms and thinks.

The Clovers they’d sent to attack Mitsugoshi never returned. In other words, their raid was a failure.

Leaf One, Leaf Two, and Leaf Three were all formidable dark knights.

They wouldn’t have been good enough to make it into the Cult’s upper echelons, but anyone else would easily consider them masters.

Yet they didn’t come back.

In fact, according to Garter, none of the members of their private army who went along with the Clovers came back, either.

Not a single one.

The group had a rear guard whose job was to report back in case the mission failed, too. But even the rear guard was MIA.

“The Clovers failed… Just how strong *are* these Mitsugoshi guards?”

“Also, Mr. Gettan, um… There are some members of the MCA who’ve expressed concern over the lack of results.”

“Make them eat their words.”

“Y-yes, sir…”

Gettan’s sightless gaze tracks Garter as the latter bows and leaves.

“So Mitsugoshi is powerful enough to defeat the Clovers… Perhaps that’s why the Cult sees them as so dangerous…?”

He presses down on the scars over his eyelids.

“No matter, though. Everything is going according to plan. They’ve already fallen into our trap,” he mutters, almost as though he’s trying to convince himself that it’s true.

Fall has ended, and winter has begun.

I dutifully play out my role at school as a background character as I wait for the counterfeits to be finished.

Everyone else is just going about their boring lives, utterly oblivious of the fact that I'm secretly working to bring down the MCA.

If everything goes well, we'll be able to cash out the counterfeits and make mad bank.

Man, the thought makes even these boring days of mine feel brilliant and wonderful.

Po, Skel, and I are basically the school's Three Stooges. Nobody has any idea of the true influence I wield.

Occasionally, as I'm enjoying my school life, I say something deep and profound to give them a hint.

"Troubled winds are blowing… Change is on the horizon…"

Nobody pays my words a second thought.

But that's the way I want it. This way, when the truth finally comes to light, a small handful of them will remember it.

They'll think back—and remember what I said.

"Come here."

"Ow—"

As I switch into foreshadowing mode, a woman with platinum blond hair and red eyes grabs me by the scruff of my neck. Alexia.

"Did you want something? I'm busy, you know."

Fighting back seems like a hassle, so I let her drag me away.

"Your schedule looks wide open to me. I need you to come watch something."

"What?"

"My sword."

Eventually, we reach an empty dojo. It's a small room on the edge of campus designed for individuals to practice on their own. I sit down on the floor and watch Alexia draw her wooden sword.

This is fine, I'll just sort of half pay attention. I take a look at her swings.

Suddenly, I notice something.

Wait… Has she always been this strong?

Now that I think about it, it's been a long while since the last time I watched her fight. I'm pretty fond of her swordplay. Nothing else about her, mind you. Now, though, it feels like she's had some sort of mental shift, or like she's finally figured something out.

It makes sense. Those tend to be the kinds of things that spur on rapid growth.

"You're looking good there," I remark as I watch her swing.

“Hmm.” Her blade halts.

“And you’ll probably keep improving, too. That’s just my opinion as an amateur, though.”

“I see. Well, thank you.”

“No problem.”

Alexia looks away from me and mops up her sweat. “You told me once you liked my swordplay, didn’t you?”

“Did I?”

“You did. And that’s why I wanted to show you this.”

“Fair enough.”

“But it still isn’t enough yet. I need to become stronger.”

“Okay.”

“You’re supposed to ask why.” Alexia glares at me. “The thing is, I wasn’t able to protect Rose. The Oriana Kingdom is in shambles, and I’m sure that wherever she is, she’s suffering, too. That’s why I need power…”

That reminds me—did Rose manage to escape successfully? I hope she’s doing okay.

“In the shadows of our peaceful lives, the world is ever changing. If we stand still, we’re sure to be left behind.”

True, that. And I’m the one pushing the change.

“I don’t want to just be a bystander anymore. It’s funny, though… Ever since I began acting on my own, it seems like the days just fly by.”

“That’s just how it goes, I guess.”

“I’m happy you’re able to act so carefree about it. Well, thank you for today. I hope that you never have to change those carefree ways of yours.”

She sighs, and I take my leave.

Outside, the sun’s already set.

Now that it’s winter, it’s starting to get pretty nippy at night. I walk briskly back to the dorm, change into my John Smith outfit, and make for an abandoned lot.

There, I find a therianthrope with brown cat ears.

It’s Natsu, one of Yukime’s attendants.

I erase my presence, sneak up close, and—

“State your business.”

—I pop out right behind her.

With a start, she hurriedly turns around and looks at me with her feline eyes.

“M-Mr. Smith, please don’t scare me like that.”

“That wasn’t my intention…”

A good shadowbroker always acts nonchalant about stuff like this.

“Now, your business?”

When she hears my question, Natsu’s smile broadens. This is what she’s been waiting for.

Natsu and Kana are Yukime’s aides. They’re apparently sisters, but they don’t look particularly similar.

Natsu has brown cat ears and a mature, womanly air about her, whereas Kana is more childish, and her cat ears are black.

Her brown cat ears twitch as she answers my question. “The goods are complete.”

“I see…”

Hell yeah, they’re finally here!

The factory where the counterfeits are being made is an underground facility between the capital and the Lawless City.

I’m actually the one who recommended this place to Yukime. Long ago, a group of bandits kidnapped my sister and held her here, and the others and I all hunted them down together. It’s the very image of an ideal secret base.

After the counterfeits get made here, our strategy is to ship them to the Lawless City and then circulate them through the capital from there. That way, it’ll be harder for the MCA to figure out where they’re coming from.

When I step inside, I find that the interior of the bandit hideout I raided with Alpha and the others when we were all kids has been completely transformed into Yukime’s counterfeiting factory.

I cast a glance at her hardworking employees, then follow Natsu deeper inside.

When I open a beautifully remodeled door, I’m greeted by a large office.

“So you’ve come, Mr. John…”

I take a seat across from Yukime on the room’s sofa set.

“I hear they’re complete.”

“See for yourself.” Yukime flashes me a seductive smile, then opens the package on the table.

Inside are two rolls of bills.

Both are composed of ten thousand–*zeni* notes, and each stack looks about a hundred bills tall.

“Pray tell. Can you figure out which ones are real?”

Given Yukime’s tone, she’s pretty darn confident.

I pick up the rolls and compare them.

Shit. I don’t have a clue.

However, this is a situation where a Super Elite Agent should be able to pick up on even the tiniest of discrepancies.

By enhancing my vision to crazy levels, I finally catch them. The quality of the paper, the consistency of the ink, and the printing are all ever so slightly different.

But there’s still a problem… I don’t remember what the originals are supposed to be like.

It’s okay, though.

At times like this, it’s important to be confident in your ability to bullshit your way through.

I flip through the bills for no reason, smiling suggestively and nodding like I know what I’m doing.

“Do I even need to say?”

“What do you possibly mean?” Yukime looks puzzled.

“When you compare the two, this one’s paper is coarser.”

I hold up the rougher stack.

“There’s a difference in the ink, too. This one has more bleed.”

Her eyes go wide.

“Finally, the printing is ever so slightly off-center. See, here.”

Yukime finally takes the rolls and compares them.

“Y-you’re right, it is. I was certain we checked that…”

“Is there really any need for me to say which one is fake?” I exude pressure from my body as I ask the question.

“No… It goes without saying that the one with more inaccuracies is the real one.”

If there are two choices, just avoid the question.

“It would appear you tried too hard to make them look real.”

“…We will begin remaking them at once.”

“That won’t be necessary. I doubt anyone but me would have spotted the discrepancies.”

“I am still no match for you, it would seem, Mr. John. We will begin distributing them tomorrow without delay, then.”

“Good.”

“As we release more counterfeits, they will launch an investigation. I trust you can handle putting an end to it. However…”

Yukime’s sentence trails off, as though she’s having trouble getting the words out.

“…What is it?”

“I have just one request.”

“Oh?”

“If you happen to cross paths with a man named Gettan… Might I ask you to let him escape with his life?”

“…And why should I do that?”

Yukime looks down as she mulls over what to say. Then, taking great care with her words, she answers me.

“Back when I was a wee girl, when I only had one tail, I lived together with my mother. Our village was small, we Spirit Foxes.”

As she hangs her head, her voice takes on a nostalgic tone.

“We lived in peace, unscathed by the wars of the world. My mother had three tails, and with her power, she made a living hunting. Then I would help clean and prepare the game she brought back. It was a simple life but a happy one. But those days would not last forever. One day, when she went out hunting, my village…”

She cuts herself off and looks up.

“Mayhap that is enough for today. I shall save the rest for once our bond is a touch deeper.” She smiles mischievously.

“You aren’t going to tell me—?”

“Shall we deepen our bond now?” She chuckles. “I joke, I joke. That man stole everything from me. Now, it is *my* turn to take everything from *him*. Only then shall he die, and only by my hand…”

Yukime’s mischievous smile is still plastered across her face, and her voice is the same as always.

“Revenge, then? Very well.”

“Gettan is a blind wolf with scars fastening his eyes shut.”

“Got it.”

I stand and turn away from her.

“You’ll have your revenge. But take care, or it’ll consume you and lead you astray from your path…,” I murmur as I leave.

The Eminence in Shadow

onestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as
g as I can remember.
s it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
stermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
aracters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role
hind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
airs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
anted to be one of them.
nk of children who worship their favorite superheroes.

I honestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
All I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as
long as I can remember.
Was it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
Eh, I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
mastermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
characters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role
behind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
I wanted to be one of them.
Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

Circulating Counterfeit Cash!

The Eminence in Shadow
Volume 3

Chapter 6

Chapter 6

Circulating Counterfeit Cash!

As Alpha is looking over documents in her office, she suddenly looks up and frowns.

There's a sound.

"Alpha, bad news!! Plergh!"

The door flies open, and Gamma tumbles in. She slides across the floor, then crashes skull-first into Alpha's desk.

"What is it? You seem to be in rather a hurry to tell me."

Gamma presses down on her nose with tears in her eyes. "Owwww… Bad news. Th-there are counterfeits…"

"Counterfeits…?"

"Counterfeits of the MCA's currency have entered circulation!"

Alpha's eyes go wide. "Tsk… How many?"

"Not much, for now."

"Does the MCA know?"

"Not yet, I don't think."

"Start spreading rumors. We need the MCA to realize what's going on."

"Understood."

"Meanwhile, we'll open an investigation into where they're coming from. This mission takes top priority."

Gamma nods solemnly. "Agreed. We have to nip this in the bud."

"If a credit crisis happens, we won't get away unscathed, either… Don't tell me this is…"

"What is it?" Gamma looks quizzically at Alpha, who's lapsed into thoughtful silence.

"It's nothing."

"I certainly hope so. I'll mobilize the Numbers and begin the investigation."

Gamma bows, then leaves. Alpha watches her go, then turns her gaze to the window.

The roadside trees sway in the wind, their red and yellow leaves twirl in the air.

"Don't tell me this was part of their plan… No, I'm just overthinking things," she quietly murmurs as she shakes her head.

“We’ve discovered counterfeits? Is that what you’re telling me?”

When he hears the news from Garter, Gettan doesn’t have to feign his astonishment.

“W-we’re looking into the details as we speak…”

Garter’s voice shakes, but the reprimand he’s bracing himself for never comes.

“Um, Mr. Gettan…?”

“…Find out where they’re coming from. Now.”

“Y-yes, sir! At once!” Garter quickly rushes out of the room before Gettan can start yelling at him.

Gettan crosses his arms and starts thinking.

The discovery of counterfeits isn’t the bit he’s surprised about.

After all, “having counterfeits discovered” had been his plan all along.

Once counterfeits make their way into circulation, a credit crisis is bound to happen, and the MCA’s bills will become little more than scraps of paper.

That’ll make the people start casting doubt on Mitsugoshi Bank’s bills, too.

The credit crisis will spread like wildfire.

The MCA’s been printing paper money for credit creation, but Mitsugoshi Bank is no different.

In other words, Mitsugoshi Bank won’t have enough reserves to meet people’s increased desire to trade in their paper currency. The MCA will go bankrupt, but Mitsugoshi will follow soon after.

Mitsugoshi Bank’s bills are incredibly precise. Any counterfeits would get spotted immediately; they’d never make it far in the marketplace.

However, if the MCA printed low-quality, easy-to-copy currency, then that wouldn’t pose a problem.

That had been Gettan’s plan.

Except the counterfeits weren’t supposed to be found until later.

The Cult still has a good deal of money tied up in the MCA. They weren’t supposed to start introducing the counterfeits into circulation until they’d transferred it all to safety.

“Did the schedule change…?”

If that was what the Cult’s leadership had decided, then Gettan has no choice but to follow along. Still, though, they could have at least told him.

“What exactly is going on?”

Gettan needs to check in with his bosses. If anyone messes up here, the Cult stands to lose a huge amount of funds.

He rubs the aching scars on his eyelids.

Just as planned, we're slowly introducing the counterfeits into the system and cashing them in.

As John Smith, I stand atop the clock tower and gaze down upon the city's unprecedentedly prosperous nightlife as I try to predict what the organizations working behind its scenes will do.

"This presence… The organizations' plans are coming into motion…"

I smile meaningfully.

Who will be the first to detect our schemes, I wonder?

As I idly enjoy the nighttime view, I spot a carriage trying to leave the capital inconspicuously.

I also spot the three figures trailing after it…

"I see… Well, it makes sense that the first ones to notice would be…"

Following the figures, I leap down from the clock tower.

The moment I saw their slime bodysuits, I knew they were associated with Mitsugoshi.

"Sorry…but I can't have you knowing the truth just yet."

Even though it's ultimately for their sake, I *am* currently pretending that I've betrayed them.

Only when the dust settles will they finally learn the truth.

As Number 664 stealthily follows the carriage leaving the capital, she turns around and glares at Number 666.

"Number 666, you really, *really* can't act on your own, got it? As your squad leader, I need to know you're going to follow my orders."

"I know."

"Clearly you don't, or we wouldn't need to have this conversation. Good grief… You rushed off on your own last time. I know everything ended up going okay, but still, what are you in such a hurry for?"

"I'm just… It's nothing." Number 666 hangs her head as she offers a brief denial.

"See, you're always trying to shoulder everything on your own. I won't know what's going on in your head unless you tell me, you know."

"Maybe it'd be best if we just focused on the mission."

"Oh, yeah, no kidding. But in order to do that, I have to start by telling off a certain *someone* who likes to take a little too much initiative."

Number 664 looks away from Number 666 and sighs.

As she does, she hears a yawn coming from behind.

"Hey, 665, did you just *yawn*?"

Number 664 turns around. This time, it's Number 665 she glares at.

"Noooope."

"You did. You totally did. I heard you. You need to focus on the mission, too, all right? I already went over just how important it is."

“Oh-kayyyy.”

As Number 665 gives her listless response, Number 664 turns her glare back toward the carriage running in front of her.

Their mission this time is to find out where the MCA counterfeits are coming from.

Gamma of the Seven Shadows narrowed down the list of suspicious trade routes, and the carriage running in front of them is traveling along one of them.

It has been impressed upon Number 664 just how important their mission is.

That is precisely why she’s so worried.

For one, Number 666 is rushing things. Now, everyone knows how strong she is, and it’s thanks in large part to her that their squad is regarded so highly.

Recently, though, her habit of acting on her own has started to become intolerable.

Number 664 doesn’t know what’s gotten her so riled up, but at this rate, she’s bound to eventually make some major blunder.

In this world, there are some screwups that just can’t be fixed. Given the kinds of missions they go on, a single mistake can easily prove fatal…

As she starts concentrating again, Number 664 prays they’ll be able to complete their mission without anything going wrong.

However—her wish goes unanswered.

“Below us!” Number 666 abruptly calls out.

They all react to her voice and try to leap away.

However, Number 666 herself is the only one who makes it in time.

“Hwah?!”

“Ah!”

Numbers 664 and 665 trip on something and tumble to the ground.

When they catch themselves and rise back to their feet, they discover something thin and threadlike tangled around their legs.

“Is this…thread?” Number 664 asks.

Number 665 answers, “It seems like steel wire with magic running through it, maybe…”

The two of them cut through the wire with their slime swords, then brace themselves for the follow-up attack.

In their peripheral vision, they can make out Number 666 staring intently at the darkness with her sword at the ready.

They can’t sense any other presences.

However, a man is clearly walking toward them through the night.

His shoes click against the hard ground as he strides forward.

He’s wearing a suit, and his hair is parted to the sides. His face is obscured from view by some sort of inorganic mask.

Notably, he’s empty-handed.

He isn’t holding a single weapon.

When they strain their eyes, though, they can make out the wire that surrounds him flashing in the moonlight.

It's drifting freely through the air, as if it has a will of its own.

"Be careful. He's the one using that steel wire," Number 664 warns the others as they square off against the wire-user.

There's a man wearing a strange mask surrounded by countless wires gleaming in the moonlight. The whole scene seems almost fantastical.

"My name is John Smith. Begone—you don't need to know what lies beyond yet."

His voice is as artificial as his mask, and it's impossible to get a read on his emotions.

The steel wire scatters through the night sky.

As it does, it shines under the moonlight.

Number 664 relies on that faint glimmer to dodge the wire as it coils around.

Its speed doesn't pose much of a problem. The issues lie in how difficult the wires are to make out, how unpredictable their movements are, and their sheer quantity.

John Smith has only ten fingers, yet somehow, the number of wires he's controlling far surpasses that count.

They come rushing in from all directions.

Between the angles and the timing, it's a mean piece of work.

They seem to be predicting Number 664's movements, as they always seem ready to cut off her escape routes. Then, by limiting the directions she can dodge, they're functionally controlling where she can go.

As a result, she can't approach him.

The wires have a longer range than their swords. If they can't get close, they can't attack.

Even knowing that, none of them has been able to close the distance by even a step since the fight started.

In fact, they seem to be losing ground.

It took the man only a scant few seconds to completely control the battlefield—and he hasn't taken a single step.

By just manipulating the wires with his ten fingers, he's been able to send the three women scurrying. They're like puppets, dancing on his strings.

"Everyone, fall back."

Number 664 issues the order, and the three of them move out of the wires' range.

As long as they're in John Smith's reach, all they're doing is burning their own stamina.

However, that doesn't change the fact that they have no way to attack him.

As they exchange glances, all three of them shake their heads.

This man—he's strong.

They'd been thrown off by his unconventional weapon, but even taking that into consideration, his ability to control space is phenomenal.

After all, accurately controlling dozens of wires, predicting the Numbers' movements, and leading them exactly the way he wanted? Not many could pull that off.

Number 664 knows plenty of people who are stronger than her.

Number 666, for one, as well as the Numbers' leadership, and the overwhelmingly powerful Seven Shadows above even them. All of them are far, far more skilled than she is.

But this John Smith is in a different league than any of them.

His power doesn't stem from his magic, his strength, his speed, or even the technical talent that lets him wield them all.

True, the skill required to manipulate his wires is high. However, the true nature of his power lies elsewhere.

John Smith's true power…is his ability to control the battlefield.

As a squad leader and as someone who gives orders to two others, Number 664 can tell. John Smith's skill is born from a profound ability to envision the battlefield from above and a keen eye for understanding a fight's progression and predicting its future developments.

In other words, he's endowed with an incredibly sharp ability to think battles through.

"What's wrong? Not approaching?"

John Smith still hasn't moved a toe. He's simply standing in place and gazing down at the three Numbers.

That's how composed he is.

He's confident he can deal with any situation that might arise.

The wires he's deployed under the night sky have completely cut off their ability to fight back.

One wrong move, and they'll get completely tangled up.

Retreat seems like an increasingly attractive option.

Number 666 will probably object, but Number 664 will just have to shut her down.

A voice breaks her from her reverie.

"If you won't approach, then I suppose I'll just have to come to you—"

"Wha…?!"

John Smith's finger twitches.

When it does, Number 664 suddenly notices the thin wire wrapped around her neck.

What?! When did that happen?!

She should be outside of his range right now!

"Nobody ever said the wires were all the same length. And their thickness varies, too, of course…"

"It can't be—!"

Now that she gets a better look at the wire around her neck, Number 664 can tell just how thin and discreet it is.

The only wires they saw up until then were the ones John Smith *let* them see.

"You mean, from the very beginning…?"

"That's right—from the very beginning."

Number 664 has been dancing on the palm of his hand.

She grimaces, and the wire around her neck tightens.

It's filled with incredibly dense magic. All he needs to do is put a little more strength into it, and her neck will snap like a twig.

"If you're going to kill me, get it over with. I-I'm not telling you anything." She glares at John Smith.

Number 665 and Number 666 are bound, too. Number 664 braces herself for the inevitable.

That's when Number 666 makes her move.

She steps forward.

She simply steps forward, faster than John Smith can pull his wire.

"HRAAAAAGH!!"

Then, with her entire being devoted solely to speed, she charges at him.

"Good choice—"

However, his composure remains unbroken.

He simply gives his right hand's fingers a light tug.

"But nobody ever said the wire around your neck was the only one I laid."

Suddenly, Number 666 tumbles to the ground.

Then, midway through her fall, she comes to an unnatural halt suspended in the air.

There are countless wires already wrapped around all her limbs.

Then, out of nowhere, the same happens to the other two. They were bound head to toe from the very start. The moment they failed to noticed that fact, the battle's outcome was decided.

"Rgh…! Just kill me!" Number 664 moans.

For some reason, however, the man stops at binding them, making no effort to end their lives.

"This is a warning."

His voice is cold and unfeeling.

"Don't get involved—you don't need to know any more than that for now."

With that, he casually frees them.

"Akh, akh!" Number 666 glares at John Smith as she coughs.

Number 664 immediately dashes forward.

It's to hold Number 666 down.

"That's enough! We're withdrawing."

"—!"

"We can't beat him; surely you realize that! You'll end up dead!"

Number 666 hangs her head in frustration. "I…"

"We have to warn Gamma about him…about John Smith…"

Until they get rid of him, they'll never figure out where the counterfeits are coming from.

Number 664 stares fixatedly at John Smith as he leaves.

"…And that concludes our report."

Alpha and Gamma listen as Number 664 relays what happened on their mission.

"—The three of you together couldn't lay a finger on him?"

"That's correct…" Number 664 shakes her head under the weight of Alpha's gaze.

The day she joined the Shadow Garden, everything about her life changed.

The world she'd taken for granted was shattered. She lost her friends and family. But in exchange, she gained both truth and power.

She'd never even held a sword before, yet now she's strong enough to wipe the floor with just about any dark knight.

That said, there exist people she knows she can never beat.

Alpha, the head of the Seven Shadows, is a prime example of such an entity.

As Number 664 quakes in her boots, Number 666 steps forward from her side.

"John Smith was incredibly talented, though. His power was on par with the Seven Sh—"

"Y-you're out of line!!"

Number 664 frantically clamps her hand over Number 666's mouth before she can say any more.

"Mmmph, but if we could just get another chance to…mmph!"

"Be quiet, 666! *I'm* the squad captain here!"

As they watch Number 666 trying to keep talking through Number 664's forceful gag, Alpha and Gamma sigh.

"We aren't here to scold you. You did good work out there. That will be all."

"'Kaaay."

Number 665 responds unenthusiastically, then drags her teammates away with her as they grapple with each other.

Alpha sinks into her seat, then turns to Gamma. "…So what do you think?"

"John Smith… He certainly sounds formidable. But I can't think of anyone in the Cult who matches his description."

"In other words, he's with some other organization… On par with the Seven Shadows, she said?"

"Who could he possibly be?"

The Seven Shadows is home to all sorts.

Some of its members lack combat prowess, such as Gamma, whereas others specialize in it, like Delta.

“We should send in Delta.”

“Delta? …Yes, I suppose that’d be for the best.”

It’s hard to picture Delta losing in a straight-up battle.

“John Smith, huh…?”

Alpha’s blue eyes narrow.

After gently driving Mitsugoshi’s hit women back, I spend my next few afternoons the same way I always do and my next few nights acting as an agent under the cover of darkness.

I’m a busy man—touching base with Yukime, protecting the flow of counterfeits, and stopping anyone who tries to find out where they’re coming from.

Mitsugoshi seems to have their guard up, as they haven’t tried anything since.

Tonight, once again, I lurk in the darkness and protect the carriage filled with counterfeits.

As it rolls across the evening roads, a silent, barely perceptible presence approaches it.

—An assassin.

Like I said, though, I can barely sense them.

If that’s the case, well…there’s only one person I know who can mask their presence so skillfully.

A little while later, a familiar figure emerges from the darkness.

It’s a woman clad in a black bodysuit, her muscles supple and her movements flexible.

I’d know her anywhere—it’s Delta.

It makes sense. I drove off that three-woman squad of theirs already, so now they’re sending in the biggest guns they’ve got.

Unfortunately for them, though, they chose wrong. John Smith fights with wires, so his style matches up well against hot-blooded meatheads. Against Delta, all I have to do is tie her down with my hidden wires and that’ll be all she wrote. Oh wait. Her instincts are crazy sharp, so there’s a chance she’ll be able to avoid them all on intuition alone.

Actually, that’s totally what’s gonna happen.

Wait… Is Delta secretly my *worst* matchup?

Eh, whatever. Worst comes to worst, I’ll just go full tryhard against her and win the fight that way.

She’s probably noticed me by now, so I make my grand appearance.

“My name is John Smith. You go no furth—”

“Boss man, what’s up?” She sniffs at the air as she asks the question, her tail wagging happily.

“My, uh, my name is John Smith. I’m not your Boss m—”

“Boss man! Wanna go hunting?”

“…I’ll pass.”

It’s no use. She has me dead to rights.

I did take a bath and drench myself in perfume before this, but I guess I underestimated Delta’s nose.

I take off my mask and reveal myself.

“Boss man, you’re John Smith?”

“Yeah, basically.”

“Oh-woof… That means I can’t beat John Smith… I gotta go tell Alpha!”

“Hold it!”

As Delta makes to go run off, I grab her by the tail to stop her. Sorry, I think I pulled a couple tufts of fur loose.

“Yow! Not my tail! No pulling! Pulling bad!”

“Sorry, sorry, sorry. Now, Delta, I need you to listen to me *real* close. See, I’m on a confidential secret mission right now.”

“What’s a confidential secret mission?”

“A confidential secret mission is a mission that’s confidential and secret, so you can’t let anyone know about it.”

“Wow, cool! I wanna do that, too!”

“No, only I can do this particular mission. But if you tell Alpha about John Smith, then I’ll fail. You know why, right?”

“Nope!”

“Because it won’t be a secret anymore, see. So you can’t tell anyone about any of this.”

“But Alpha gave me a mission…” Delta’s ears droop as she looks at me.

“It’s okay, I have a new mission for you. You remember the Shadow Garden’s rules, right?”

“Nope!”

“The missions I give you take priority over everything else. Even the ones Alpha gives you.”

“Alpha won’t get mad?”

“Nah.”

Alpha will definitely get mad. I know that.

After all, Delta’s on an official Mitsugoshi-related mission right now. Using the bullshit Shadow Garden rules from when we were kids to overrule it is totally foul play.

Sorry, Delta. When all this is over, I’ll help you apologize to Alpha.

“This is for the greater good…”

“The greater good…?”

“Yeah, the greater good.”

“The greater good!”

“That’s right. Sorry about this, Delta. When you finish your mission, I’ll give you some kind of reward.”

“You’ll do anything I want?!” Delta’s eyes gleam, and her tail starts wagging excessively.

“I will not. But I promise I’ll try, as long as it’s something within my abilities, and as long as it isn’t too much work, and as long as it doesn’t cost any money.”

“You’ll do whatever I say?!”

“Other than those categories I said, sure.”

“Hooray! I’ll do it!”

“Now, what should I have your mission be? Oh, here we go. If you go straight that way, you’ll eventually hit the Lawless City, and when you do, there’ll be a black tower there. In that tower, there’s a guy named Juggernaut. Now, he’s a mean old bandit, so I need you to hunt him.”

“Lawless City. Black tower. Juggernaut. And I can hunt him?”

“Yup, that sounds right.”

“Got it! And when I hunt him, you’ll do whatever I say!”

“With those caveats, yeah. Oh, and we’re in no rush here, so make sure you take your time getting there.”

“Lawless City! Black Juggler! Hunting!”

With that, Delta takes off at a dash.

I feel like she didn’t get that quite right, but I’m sure it’ll be fine.

At the end of the day, I got Delta out of the capital, so we’ll chalk that up as a win. Her acting sucks, so even if I tried to get her to keep this a secret, I’d be exposed in no time.

This way, it’ll take the others a while to track her down and pump her for info. That works out perfectly for me.

After all, I’ve decided they can only know the whole truth once all the dust has settled.

“Delta was tracking John Smith, but she’s gone dark.”

“—?!”

When Alpha hears Gamma’s report, she drops her pen and looks straight at her.

“We also found this at the scene…”

Gamma shows her some scraps of fur from Delta’s tail. Sorrow wells up in Alpha’s heart upon seeing they were forcefully ripped out.

Gamma’s eyes look cold and steely. However, uncontrollable fury lurks just below their surface.

“I see… So Delta’s been…?”

Upon realizing just how frail her own voice sounds, Alpha takes a moment to compose herself.

She'd been prepared for this.

Someone was always going to fall, eventually. Today just happens to be that day.

"I can't imagine her abandoning a mission you assigned her. That idiot… She might not have had much going on upstairs, she might have been all brawn and no brain, but she always did listen to you, Alpha…" Gamma's voice trembles.

"It's okay. I know." Alpha tries to comfort her.

The Shadow Garden's missions are fraught with peril, but because of Delta's combat prowess, she's always the one being asked to handle the most dangerous ones. Her not coming back almost certainly means she's dead…

"Continue the search. We have to find her, even if it's just a body…"

"Understood."

Alpha then takes the lock of Delta's fur. After delicately wrapping it in cloth, she slips it into her cleavage.

Number 666 tried to tell her how dangerous John Smith was. She shouldn't have sent Delta in alone.

A deep voice wells up from within her throat. "John Smith…!"

"Also, the amount of counterfeits in circulation is continuing to rise. At this rate, we're bound for a credit crisis…"

"That was his plan from the very beginning," replies Alpha.

"…Huh?"

"John Smith isn't some small-time crook trying to use counterfeits to make a quick buck. Causing the credit crisis was his goal all along… If we look at it that way, all the pieces fit into place."

"What…?!"

"The credit crisis is a poison that will destroy Mitsugoshi *and* the MCA. While we've been fighting, he's been sowing his seeds in the shadows… And now, he's going to take everything."

"That can't be… You're saying that he saw this all coming from the get-go?"

"He understood the ingredients for a credit crisis, he noticed the flaws in the MCA's bills, and he used those two tiny grains of information to form a flawless plan."

"Is that even *possible*…?"

"—It is for John Smith."

The sound of Alpha grinding her teeth fills the air.

As the Cult's messenger leaves, Gettan slams his fist against the desk.

"What's the meaning of this?! Our counterfeits haven't been distributed yet?!"

He checked in with his bosses earlier about the counterfeit situation.

However, they told him that they didn't have anything to do with the fakes that were currently making the rounds.

In other words, that means some third party is the one mass-producing fake bills.

At this rate, the MCA is going to go under way ahead of schedule, and the Cult will suffer tremendous losses.

"This is unthinkable! Who would *dare*?!"

More and more counterfeits are pouring in every day, yet they still have no idea where they're coming from.

It's clearly the work of organized crime.

Whoever's doing it must have a mind like a steel trap, a sizable bankroll, sizable manpower, and intimate knowledge of the mechanisms behind credit creation…

"Wait…it's so simple…"

Isn't Gettan himself currently locked in battle with an organization that fulfills all those conditions?

"It's Mitsugoshi!!"

In the event of a credit collapse, Mitsugoshi and the MCA will go bankrupt in kind. However, there is a way to recover: by preparing enough funds to weather the bank run.

Mitsugoshi must have realized sooner than anyone just how shoddy the MCA's bills are.

By manufacturing counterfeits and liquidating them in the marketplace, they must have been able to raise substantial capital.

They'd seen through Gettan's plan.

They'd seen through everything, and now they're using it against him.

"Dammit… Cuuurse them!!" Gettan roars.

At this rate, he's quite literally going to lose his head.

The MCA will fall, the Cult will suffer catastrophic losses, and Mitsugoshi will gain a complete monopoly over the marketplace.

Gettan will be lucky if all the Cult does is kill him.

"It's not too late, I can still make it…! If I can just recover those funds…!"

According to Garter, there's a man named John Smith protecting the counterfeits' distribution chain.

If Gettan tracks him down, he can still salvage this…

The full moon hangs glimmering over the crisp winter night air.

Beta is with her master, delivering her regular report.

She finishes telling him about the Shadow Garden's activities like always, then moves on to Mitsugoshi news.

Normally, her report only contains information about the Shadow Garden. After all, Mitsugoshi's work is only peripheral to this organization as a whole. There's usually no need for her to waste his time with trivialities.

At the moment, though, Mitsugoshi is in a major pinch.

Her master seems to have sensed that fact, too.

He normally just nods and says "uh-huh" during her reports, but now, the air about him changes.

He straightens his posture, takes a notepad out of his pocket, and begins writing on it as he listens to Beta's report.

Then—

"I see. And?"

"—?!"

He's actually saying something other than "uh-huh" during her regular report. Beta chokes on her words for a moment.

"F-forgive me. As I was saying, the quantity of counterfeits has—"

When her master's gaze sharpens, she feels a tinge of joy.

He's taking this seriously.

Her master is a busy man, and he rarely gets involved in Beta and the others' affairs. He surely has much grander tasks that he's devoting his time and strength toward.

If he's getting serious now, that means that the situation must be important enough to warrant it.

The incident with Delta cast a heavy pall over all of the Shadow Garden.

However, if their master's going to get serious—Beta's sure they'll be able to overcome anything that stands in their way.

Warmth floods her heart.

"The amount of money in circulation's increased, so the value of goods has begun rising as well. At the moment, the inflation rate stands at…"

"I don't quite follow…"

"—?!"

Her master just told her that he didn't follow.

Now, he obviously didn't mean it literally. Her master understands everything, after all. That means he must be suggesting something else—in other words, there must be some error in her report. He's asking how it's possible that she made such a boneheaded mistake.

Maybe she got the inflation rate wrong, or maybe there was some flaw in her underlying logic, but the fact of the matter is that he noticed her failure in an instant.

"I-I'll go back over my analysis immediately."

She screwed up, and just when her master started taking the issue seriously, too. Beta's face reddens in shame and vexation.

"I don't follow, but oh well. May as well write it down anyways."

"My sincerest apologies."

Her report ends.

However, there's something else she needs to tell him, too.

As she watches her master start to put away his notepad, she speaks solemnly.

"There is one other thing I need to inform you about today."

"…I'm listening."

Upon seeing the quiet, almost drowsy look in his eyes, Beta realizes something.

He's already figured out what she's about to tell him. Now that she thinks about it, it's obvious. In fact, it would be stranger if he *didn't* know.

Even so, she still needs to say it.

She needs to tell him that one of their dear comrades died…

It's her duty as one of the people who let it happen.

"Delta was pursuing John Smith when we lost contact with her. Given the situation, we have no choice but to assume she's…"

Beta's voice is shaking. Delta was a dear teammate of hers. She was a handful to deal with, sure, but something about her always set Beta's heart at ease, like an adorable little sister.

"…dead…," she manages to say.

Upon hearing the news, her master cocks his head and thinks for a moment.

"No, no. She just…went off on a long journey, that's all," he finally says.

When she hears the gentle euphemism, Beta is unable to hold back the tears.

"You're…you're right. I see now. She's just off on a long journey…"

Tears stream down her cheeks. She's thankful for her master's awkward kindness.

"We consider John Smith to be a formidable foe. If it's at all possible, Master Shadow, we'd like to ask for your assistance in dealing with him…"

"Sorry, but I have business of my own to attend to."

"No, of course. Forgive me for my impertinence."

Her master's already moving along a different course.

No matter what it is, it must be absolutely essential for both Mitsugoshi and the Shadow Garden as a whole.

"That's all I have for you today… Oh, but before I go…"

Her report's finished, so there's other work she needs to get to, but there's something she wants to confirm first.

"And, um, forgive me for asking, Master Shadow, but that notepad…"

"This one?"

"Yes, about that notepad. We actually have a rule about immediately destroying or encrypting sensitive documents, so…"

She's sure he knows all about that. She just wants to make absolutely certain.

Her master freezes for a split second, then hands it to her. "Have a look."

"W-wait, this is…!"

Upon seeing the script written on it, Beta's eyes go wide.

"I encoded it in a cipher I made up of the five different languages—Japanese *hiragana* script, *katakana* script, characters, Arabic numerals, and Romanized Japanese."

"Y-you came up with this all by yourself?!"

"Yup."

The letters scrawled across the page aren't just written randomly. They're simple yet complex, regular yet chaotic.

Trying to decipher the five intermingled languages would be a daunting task.

Beta gazes reverently at her master, the man who devised that whole encryption method solo.

"Um, if it's not too much to ask, would you mind teaching me this code sometime…?"

"Hmm… It's a bit too early for that."

"I… I see…" Beta slumps her shoulders, crestfallen.

"Now that you mention it, though…"

With that, her master quickly writes something on the pad, then tears out the page and passes it to Beta.

"What's this…?"

"When you can make out the meaning there, I'll explain it to you—I'll explain everything."

There's a short passage written on the sheet in the five languages.

"Th-thank you so much!"

Beta carefully slips the scrap of paper between her breasts and makes a mental note to head to the lab at once to get it analyzed.

The MCA has mobilized a huge number of men and sent them looking for John Smith.

However, they haven't been able to find so much as a trace. Also, owing to the size of the search party, they've been drawing a whole lot of unwanted attention.

The existence of counterfeits hasn't been made public, but anyone with a sharp enough intuition is beginning to notice something's afoot.

There isn't much time left.

The crisis is almost here.

"Halt right there! We're conducting a search of this carriage."

Deep in the night, a group of men stop a carriage from leaving the capital.

They belong to the Garter Corporation's private army, and they've been going after every carriage that looks even slightly suspicious.

Now, they don’t have permission to do so, and their actions have no legal basis behind them. However, most merchants wouldn’t dare cross the MCA, so they have no choice but to comply with the investigation.

Just like the others, the carriage complies and comes to a stop.

The Garter men reach up and violently grab at the vehicle’s curtains.

“…I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

“What?”

Hearing a deep voice from somewhere, the soldiers stop and look around.

“You’ll regret it.”

“Hah, bite me.”

Scoffing at the warning, one of the soldiers throws open the curtain.

He sees a mountain of gold coins inside—and his head immediately goes flying off.

“Wha…?”

“I told you you’d regret it.”

With a spray of blood, the beheaded soldier crumples to the ground. A masked man wearing a black suit appears from behind him.

“Wh-who the hell are you?!”

The rest of the soldiers surround him and draw their swords.

“My name is John Smith. I am the man who destroys it all and starts from scratch—”

“I-it’s John Smith! Don’t move, you, just drop your weapon…”

Several fine threads shine in the moonlight.

However, nobody notices their glimmer.

Their heads go flying off in unison.

Knowing nothing and noticing nothing, their lives instantly end.

As their blood rains down on the surroundings, the gold coin–laden carriage starts moving again.

It gradually accelerates and vanishes into the distance, leaving only John Smith and the corpses behind.

He jerks his fingers as though playing the piano, and the myriad threads extending from them twitch in turn.

He calls out to the empty air.

“—I know you’re there.”

His steel wires slice through the darkness.

Something stirs.

The next moment, a woman clad in a black bodysuit emerges from the seemingly empty gloom. A mask covers her face, but her blue eyes are visible beneath it.

She’s Alpha, the Shadow Garden’s most powerful slayer—and she’s here for revenge.

“Hello, John Smith.”

Her voice has the beautiful tenor of a bell ringing. Her platinum blond hair flashes in the moonlight as she bows.

“And—good-bye.”

Without pause, her ebony sword cleaves toward him…but even though it slices straight through him, there’s no tactile response.

“—That was an afterimage.”

Hearing his voice behind her, Alpha whirls around.

John Smith is standing there, unharmed.

She levels a frigid gaze his way as she readies her sword again.

She’s fighting a foe that was powerful enough to put Delta down. She came in knowing he’d be strong. However, the skill he showed in that last exchange far exceeded her expectations.

“Moving at high speeds by compressing magical energy… That requires incredibly precise control and magic circuits able to withstand a tremendous burden. How did you learn to move like that?”

John Smith offers no answer. His fingers twitch, and countless white lines whiz through the darkness.

—Steel wire.

This corroborates Number 664’s report. Alpha calmly analyzes their movements and looks for the real ones lurking among them.

Twing—a small noise echoes out as the thin wires are sliced in twain in midair.

“You hide your real, thinner wires in among decoys… I already know your tricks.”

“Oh…?”

Alpha makes her move.

After closing the distance in an instant, she slices at John Smith with her black blade. The attack is aimed straight at his throat, and the timing is such that it should be impossible to dodge.

With the smallest tilt of his head, however, John Smith manages to do just that.

“—!”

Alpha’s movements…stop.

Her eyes go wide, and John Smith’s wires bear down on her.

“This…can’t be…”

Alpha watches the wires, slices them away with her sword, then goes in for a counterattack in the space between their strikes.

It’s fast and nimble—the perfect slash.

This time, there’s no way anyone could avoid it.

And yet…

“But *why*…?”

John Smith’s dodge is just as perfect as the last.

The sword’s aim is unerring until the last possible moment. It practically slides over his skin. That technique, where he uses the smallest possible movements to dodge—

Alpha puts a wide gap between them, effectively abandoning combat altogether.

“What are you doing here…?”

She takes off her mask. Her beautiful elvish face comes into view.

“Why are you…?”

Her eyes flash with certainty.

“…Shadow…”

John Smith meets her gaze for a moment, then takes off his mask in turn.

“I’ve abandoned that name…”

His face is one she knows all too well.

“What do you mean, you’ve ‘abandoned’ it?”

“Exactly what I said. I’m John Smith now. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“But *why* are you John Smith…?” Alpha’s voice sounds almost desperate.

“Because it was the best option…”

“The best option for what…? That isn’t enough to understand what’s going on.”

“You’ll know once this is all over.”

“And what about Delta? What did you do with her…?”

“Delta’s off on a long journey…”

“That doesn’t tell me *anything*…”

Alpha’s anguished cry echoes through the night as the force of her overflowing magic shakes the air.

“I’m dumb, so I don’t understand all the things you do. I’m weak, so I can’t do all the things you can. But still, even so… I want to understand, so I can support you. You saved me, saved all of us, so I want to do whatever it is I can to help.”

Alpha’s voice becomes quiet.

“But you’re always going forward on your own, leaving us just gazing at your back…”

She squeezes her sword tightly as she looks down.

“Do you not need us anymore…?”

Tears start dripping from her sapphire eyes.

“I’m doing what needs to be done,” John Smith replies.

“…”

The raging magic swirls down and coalesces on Alpha.

“I…I’m not just going to be a burden forever.”

And with that—she vanishes.

Surprise makes its way across John Smith’s face for the first time.

Her raging magic, her ebony sword, her body—every proof that she was ever there has completely disappeared.

All that’s left is a red mist.

Then Alpha appears out of the fog and tries to rip into John Smith from behind.

Her blade is a dark red.

John Smith whirls around and tries to dodge with the smallest movements possible.

Just like always.

“—?!”

A thin wound carves its way across John Smith’s cheek.

Without any warning, the dark crimson blade extends.

Alpha vanishes, and the red mist blankets their surroundings once more.

Another slice flies out of the mist.

It tears John Smith’s suit, lightly splattering his shirt with blood.

By the time he’s ready to strike back with his wires, Alpha’s body has already transformed back into fog.

An instant later, she attacks him again from behind.

The speed at which she emerges from the mist and the speed she turns back into it are both incredible.

Her one-sided attacks seem to defy the concept of space, and her unfair defense bends the laws of physics.

She vanishes, then appears.

Appears, then vanishes.

The slashes bear down on John Smith without pause, and his suit is ripped to shreds. By manipulating his wires and relying on three-dimensional movement, he’s able to avoid suffering any lethal wounds.

However, the fact that he uses wires to keep his distance matches up terribly against Alpha’s ability to override the concept of space altogether.

“—Ngh!”

His suit suffers another tear.

It seems the red mist doubles as a sensory organ of some sort, as Alpha’s able to completely sense the wires’ movements.

It looks as though John Smith has no cards left to play.

Alpha’s voice comes out from somewhere in the mist. “I’m not just a burden anymore. I’m strong enough to support you, to understand you… So please, I’m begging you…”

“Mistform, huh…? It’s an interesting technique, but it’s lacking in mass.”

As the words leave his mouth, his ebony sword materializes in his hand.

Devastating quantities of magic gather around it.

“If I blow it all away, you’ll be helpless.”

He swings his sword in a wide arc.

The released magic and wind-force combine into a massive tornado.

“This can’t be—”

The mist disappears, and Alpha reemerges.

“Good choice. If you’d stayed as mist, it could have ended poorly for you.”

Alpha looks up and sees that all the mist above them has been completely blown away.

She also sees a merciless strike bearing down on her.

“You’ve become strong.”

The ebony blade crashes into her.

“Ah…”

The force of the blow causes her to start losing consciousness.

“—Don’t worry, I hit you with the flat side.”

His footsteps start to withdraw.

“Once all this is over, you’ll realize this was for the best…”

Despite her rapidly fading consciousness, she frantically tries to reach out.

“Please… Wait…”

However, he doesn’t stop.

Little by little, slowly but surely, he’s growing distant.

“I’m begging you… Don’t leave me…”

Her voice doesn’t reach him.

The Eminence in Shadow

onestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as
g as I can remember.
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I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
stermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
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affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
I wanted to be one of them.
Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

The One to Destroy It All and Start from Scratch—with Fake Bills!

The Eminence in Shadow
Volume 3

Epilogue

Epilogue

The One to Destroy It All and Start from Scratch—with Fake Bills!

The day is finally here.

The underground facility that once served as the counterfeit factory has shut down. Only a few employees remain, and all of them are working on teardown.

The factory has served its purpose.

“Mr. John, please take a look at this…”

As John Smith, I do as Yukime says and open the large iron door.

Inside, I find a mound of gold coins piled all the way up to the ceiling.

“It’s magnificent…”

“We’ve liquidated almost all of the counterfeits. Satisfactory, no?”

The room at the bottom of the facility, which was once a prison used to confine my sister, has been transformed into a massive vault.

My heart sings upon seeing the nigh-uncountable mountain of glittering coins.

Nobody’s found us yet.

Mitsugoshi and the MCA seem to have made it as far as the Lawless City, but I’ve been playing hooky at school so I can spend 24-7 keeping them from getting any closer.

Now that we’re done, there won’t be anything linking the Lawless City to our location.

“Now all we must do is liquidate the real MCA bills I’ve prepared and the deed will be done. The MCA has nowhere near enough funds to make the exchange, so the credit crisis shall begin.”

As Yukime was trading the counterfeits for gold, she was also stockpiling authentic bills.

Once we trade them in, the MCA will go bankrupt.

After all, they’ll be out of reserves. When people find out about that, they’ll go nuts.

“That it will. The amount of money in circulation’s increased, so the value of goods has begun rising as well. At the moment, the inflation rate stands at…”

I rattle off the numbers Beta told me. The goal is to impress Yukime with how knowledgeable and good at gathering information I am.

“To think, Mr. John, that you investigated it to that extent…”

“Heh… Child’s play.”

“Once more I find myself verily glad to have joined forces with you. Without you, this plan could never have come to fruition.”

“Hey, it wasn’t all me. You did good work, too.”

Yukime grins. “You flatter me.”

We extend our hands at the same time and exchange a firm handshake.

“Now then, let us put this to rest. Would you be so kind as to patrol the area between here and the Lawless City?”

“Consider it done,” I tell her.

“In the meantime, I shall go exchange the real bills.”

“—Huh?”

That doesn’t sound right.

“What reason is there for you to go in person?”

Surely it would be smarter for her to send someone else in her place.

“There is…meaning to the act.” Yukime averts her gaze.

Ah, I get it.

Well, I guess everyone has their own personal aesthetic they like to adhere to.

“Perhaps it’s time for you to hear my tale…”

And with that, Yukime starts narrating.

“Earlier, I told you the story of my mother and me. But that was not where the tale ends. When my mother went out to hunt, our village was attacked by a hostile tribe. Besides my three-tailed mother, most of the villagers had no ability to fight, so they fled. I hid under my bed, trembling. But my door was soon kicked down, and a group of men came into the room I was hiding in. They dragged me out, and oh, the vulgarity in their eyes… The moment I thought I was done for, another man came crashing through the window and cut the cruel men down. The man, who had sleek black ears and tail, was part of the reinforcement from our allies the Great Wolf clan. He introduced himself as Gettan, then held me tight to quell my fear. I was fourteen at the time, and he was seventeen…”

Yukime’s clear eyes seem to gaze off into the past.

Gettan was Yukime’s first love.

After the attack, the Great Wolf clan helped rebuild her village.

At the time, the great hero Shiva had just fallen, and the therianthrope lands were rife with conflict. The stronger clans were terrorizing the weaker ones, seeking power in order to succeed Shiva.

Owing to the circumstances, it was only natural for people to want to form alliances to solidify their positions.

As a result, it was decided that Yukime, daughter of the village's sole three-tail, and Gettan, son of the Great Wolves' patriarch, were to be married.

Given her admiration for Gettan, Yukime agreed in a heartbeat. Her mother approved of him as well, in part because he'd saved Yukime's life, and Gettan held a great deal of affection for the fair girl, too.

Although everyone gave the betrothal their blessing, the formal marriage was postponed until Yukime turned of age at fifteen.

Until they were officially married, they weren't able to live together.

Despite their living in different villages, however, Gettan came to visit Yukime all the time. The days they spent together were irreplaceable treasures for them both.

They were the happiest days of Yukime's life, and although she was looking forward to the wedding, she also wanted them to go on forever.

But peace has a short shelf life.

There was a conflict between the major nearby tribes, and the Spirit Foxes and the Great Wolves got wrapped up in the conflict.

Yukime and the others were all forced to choose a side.

Whoever they allied themselves with would forcibly conscript them, and whoever they made enemies with would retaliate. There were no good options. The Spirit Foxes and the Great Wolves talked it out among themselves, then came to a solution.

They would make neither allies nor enemies of any of them.

Their decision to fence-sit was made at the last possible moment. However, it was a foolish choice, one that utterly failed to take into account the cruelty of war.

The Great Wolves were blessed with strength.

The Spirit Foxes were blessed with wisdom.

They'd thought that by joining forces, they could ride out the war.

Reality, however, was not so kind.

Both the Spirit Fox and the Great Wolf villages were annihilated in a single night.

The ground was wet with blood as they burned.

Gettan, the Great Wolves' strongest soldier, fought valiantly. In the end, all he was able to accomplish was escaping together with his fiancée.

As the morning sun rose, the two of them stared out over their blackened villages.

"If only I was stronger…"

"Gettan…"

Gettan hung his head, his body covered in wounds. Yukime nestled close to him.

"All I needed was power, and they wouldn't have been able to take everything from us!"

"It wasn't your fault."

"Shut up!"

Yukime's fox ears drooped and quivered at Gettan's enraged cry. "… Sorry."

"It's okay…" Gettan continued hanging his head as he spoke. "I made a proposal to the others. I told them that with this power, we'd be able to ride out the war without having to ally ourselves with either side…"

As he spoke, he pulled out a pill as red as blood.

"By taking these, we could have become powerful. We could have survived the war. But that damn woman rejected my proposal! Because of her, nobody took the drug!"

Gettan tried to stifle his laughter, and Yukime took a step back.

"…I should have killed her back at the start."

"Gettan…?"

"I was the one who killed your mom."

"Wh-what are you talking about?"

Yukime's mother had gone missing as soon as the attack had begun. Yukime was sure she was still alive somewhere.

"All of this is her fault. If we'd just taken the pills and accepted the Cult's protection, we all could have survived."

"The Cult…? Hey, Gettan, I'm a little slow, so I'm not really sure what you're talking about, but…you were joking just now, right?"

"Like hell I was. I snuck up behind her and chopped her head clean off! If it weren't for that wench—!"

"Gettan, don't tell me you're serious…" Yukime took another step backward.

"If I wanted to protect you and the village from the war, I didn't have any other choice."

"N-no! No! Stay away…"

"What's wrong? C'mon, let's go get our revenge."

Gettan offered Yukime a red pill.

"You have to take one, too. The only way to protect what's yours is to take from others. Now, seize this power so we can go slaughter the bastards who did this!"

"No! Stay away from me!!" Yukime finally turned around and began running.

"You're gonna reject me, too?!"

Something smashed into Yukime's back.

Then she collapsed facedown. Blood gushed from the sword wounds on her back.

"Don't reject power."

"G-Gettan… Why…?"

"Revenge isn't something to be afraid of. If you don't steal from others, they'll just steal from you."

"N-no… Please stop…"

"You're still rejecting me!"

As Yukime tried to crawl away, Gettan brought his sword down on her over and over.

Each individual wound was shallow, but together they brutally shredded her back. Then he planted his foot atop the cuts and whispered in Yukime's ear as she writhed in agony.

"C'mon, Yukime. Take the pill so we can have our revenge together."

"No…"

As the pain caused her consciousness to fade, she heard a strange voice.

"Yahoo! Gimme all your money!!"

The voice itself was young and ungainly, in stark contrast to the violence in its words. She must have just been hallucinating or something.

Then she passed out.

When she came to, it was night.

Her back felt strange. When she reached up and felt it, she found the bleeding had all stopped. There were probably scars, but it didn't hurt anymore.

She didn't see Gettan anywhere. For whatever reason, though, she saw blood and his fur scattered about her surroundings.

Yukime then went back to look for her mother's body. For some reason, her village was littered with the corpses of its attackers.

It didn't take her long to find her mother's body and severed head.

Its eyes were wide with shock, and the three fluffy tails Yukime had loved so much were all burned to a crisp.

"Mother…!"

Her mom had been killed.

Her friends and neighbors had been slaughtered, too.

Her village had been burned to the ground.

Their money had been stolen.

And finally, her beloved fiancé had become her bitter enemy.

"Sniff… Sob…"

As hot tears rolled down her cheeks, she burned the sight of her dear mother and her destroyed hometown into her mind.

She bit her lip.

Everything had been taken from her. All she had left was a single bitter enemy.

However, even surviving was a tough task for a fourteen-year-old with no money, power, or relatives. She spent her days traveling from place to place as a battlefield prostitute.

By the time she turned seventeen, she owned the brothel she'd been selling her body at.

She had money. Next, she wanted power.

Having had everything taken from her, she vowed to take everything from that enemy of hers in turn—

It looks like Yukime's done with her story.

I feel like I was part of a similar situation once, so I got distracted at about the halfway mark.

"I suspect you've had an inkling, Mr. John. You knew I had no interest in the companies or the money. My sole aim was to take everything from Gettan. His money. His power. And then, his life. Everything he's worked so hard to build. And to do that, I needed a company's power, as well as your help… But I had to deceive you, and for that, I beg your forgiveness."

"I see…"

Nope, my memory is failing me.

"I will settle the score with Gettan. I ask that you please believe in me and wait for my return."

Yukime smiles and stands.

There's no use racking my brain over stuff I can't remember, so I may as well get to work.

"I should get going," I say.

"Allow me to accompany you to the exit."

The two of us leave the room together.

The afternoon sky is pleasantly clear. As the gentle winter sunlight streams in through the windows, a furious voice echoes through the Garter Corporation headquarters.

"Why exactly are you having so much trouble locating John Smith?!"

President Garter hangs his head as Gettan slams his fist into the desk and screams at him.

"W-well, you see, we followed his tracks as far as the Lawless City, but any investigation in the Lawless City is incredibly risky, and we keep losing contact with the investigators…" Garter murmurs his excuses.

"Can't you see we're out of *time*?! Rumors about the counterfeits are already starting to circulate around the capital!!"

"Well, um, yes, about that… There's been an increase in people exchanging their bills for gold…"

"Tch, it's too fast!"

"A huge liquidation request came in this morning, and we've only been getting more…! The other company presidents are saying this isn't what you promised… Th-they're asking if it would be possible to shut down exchanges…"

“Idiots, the lot of them! Go silence them! If we did that, word would spread like wildfire, and hordes of people would come breaking down our doors!!”

“B-but at this rate, our reserves won’t hold out…!”

“I know that, dammit!!” Gettan slams his fist onto the desk again.

“Eek—!!”

The sturdy wooden desk splinters. Small shards fly into the air and scratch up Garter’s face.

Gettan bares his canines, then glares out the window with his blocked eyes.

“…A huge liquidation order came in this morning, you said?”

“Y-yes, sir.”

“That’s fishy… No one would have reacted that quickly. Look into who made it.”

“Y-yes, sir!”

As Garter runs off, Gettan covers his eyes with his hand.

His empty sockets throb with pain, almost as though his missing eyes were still there. Whenever that happens, he knows something related to his past is afoot.

“It can’t be… No, there’s no way…”

He presses his hand over his eyelids for a little while longer as he digs through his memories.

The Seven Shadows decide to keep the fact that John Smith is Shadow just to themselves.

Their rationale is that if the troops knew, it would strike a harsh blow to morale.

“It was probably the right decision,” thinks Gamma as she looks over Alpha’s gloomy visage.

The hearth crackles.

“He exists in a realm nobody else could possibly hope to reach…”

“Alpha…”

“That’s why he doesn’t need me anymore…”

“That’s not true.”

They’ve had this exact conversation several times now.

Alpha’s sunken into the depths of despair. She’s in no state to lead the Shadow Garden right now.

At the moment, Gamma’s the only one who can take the reins.

However, no amount of makeup can hide Gamma’s sallow cheeks or the dark circles under her eyes. She’s close to her limit, too.

Even so, there’s something she needs to report.

She steels herself, then speaks.

“The MCA’s begun going bankrupt. Crowds of people have been trading in their bills since this morning. And it’s probably only going to get worse tomorrow…”

“I see…”

“We don’t have it as bad as they do, but Mitsugoshi is seeing an uptick in people making exchanges, too. Their ranks will likely swell tomorrow, and when the MCA goes bankrupt, all hell will break loose.”

“I see…”

Alpha listens to Gamma’s report with a vacant look on her face. Finally, she responds with a brief question.

“Can we weather the storm?” she asks.

Gamma looks at her face, wavers for a moment, then decides to rip off the bandage.

“…Not with our reserves.”

That’s the simple truth of it.

Gamma and the others have been frantically raising funds in preparation for the MCA’s collapse.

However, even though they’ve been gathering gold from around the globe, it’s nowhere near the amount their credit creation practices generated.

“I see…”

Alpha smiles.

It’s a forlorn smile, and when Gamma sees it, tears well up in her eyes.

“I’m sure we’ll be fine. When the people see the mountains of gold we’ve prepared, I’m certain it’ll set their hearts at ease…”

“That’s enough.”

When the masses see the MCA go under, they’ll know there’s no guarantee the damage will stop there.

Gamma and Alpha are both all too aware of that fact.

“That’s…that’s enough…”

“Alpha…”

Alpha looks at Gamma, the heartbroken smile plastered across her face unchanged.

“He’s the one who decided to circulate the counterfeits and cause the credit crisis. He’s the one who wanted to cast us aside…”

“Th-that’s not true! Master Shadow would never abandon—”

“We just weren’t strong enough to live up to his expectations… And this is our punishment.”

“That’s not… That…”

She wants to say, “That can’t be true,” but the words won’t come out.

Their lord’s combat prowess, creativity, and ingenuity are all leagues above theirs. Even after being given the perfect environment and unbridled knowledge, none of them has been able to reach his ranks.

And now, their master’s given up on them.

“Th…that…”

Gamma goes weak in the knees. She crumples down onto the sofa.

In contrast, Alpha rises to her feet. Her eyes burn, both from the glare of the fireplace and her newfound determination.

“If this is what he wants, then it’s our job to fulfill his wishes. I took an oath… I said that if he wanted me to, I would even die… It was the first promise I ever made to him.”

“Alpha…”

Then, an interruption.

“Pardon me.”

The dark-brown-haired girl, Nu, bows as she enters the room.

“We’ve received new information. Gettan, the MCA’s de facto leader, is without a doubt connected to the Cult.”

“Go figure,” remarks Gamma.

However, finding that out now isn’t going to do them any good.

“He’d been coordinating with the Cult to bring down Mitsugoshi.”

“What was his plan?”

“It was…to introduce counterfeits into circulation and cause a credit crisis.”

“Ah… I see.” Gamma looks up at the ceiling.

He got them good.

Nobody knew Mitsugoshi was a Shadow Garden front, so she hadn’t expected the Cult to be willing to go to such suicidal lengths to take them down.

After all, sacrificing the MCA just to take Mitsugoshi down with them?

Even though it worked, surely the price was too steep.

Who would have thought they regarded Mitsugoshi as such a threat…? Gamma had overlooked the possibility.

“So in the end, the Cult successfully did us in, huh?”

“No, not quite… The Cult hasn’t actually put their plan into motion yet.”

“Wait, but that doesn’t make any—”

Gamma feels as though the puzzle pieces are rearranging themselves in her mind.

Another interruption.

“Alpha!”

Beta comes barreling into the room without so much as a knock. She’s holding a sheet of paper in her hand.

“Over at the lab, Eta decoded the encrypted message Master Shadow left us!”

Eta, the seventh member of the Seven Shadows, specializes in research. When Beta’s master gave her the encoded message, Eta was the one she’d entrusted deciphering it to.

“Look here!”

Alpha takes the proffered document. Light returns to her eyes as they trace over it.

“Alpha…?”

She responds to Gamma's puzzled voice by flashing her a broad smile.

A tear rolls down her cheek, but it's a tear of joy.

"He didn't abandon us after all…"

Upon hearing that, Gamma takes the page and reads it over.

"Th-this means—!"

The astonishing truth is laid out in Eta's handwriting.

"Sorry, but I have to betray you all. A partner and I are manufacturing counterfeits and using them to collect gold. We're squirreling away all the money in the old facility we saved my sister from back when we were kids. I know you all might resent me for this, but I believe every choice I made was for the best."

Before she realizes it, Gamma is crying, too. The puzzle in her mind's taken on a form that she hadn't dared imagine possible.

Alpha, Gamma, and Beta—all of them are beaming as the tears stream down their faces.

"Master Shadow set this all up for us," says Beta, her voice full of reverence.

"So he's been looking at the bigger picture… Who knew anyone could see so far?" Alpha's voice is thick with emotion.

Gamma's sounds relieved. "He saw through it all and made the best possible choice… An act truly befitting the man."

"He realized the Cult's plan sooner than anyone else."

"Then he used it against them. By making his own counterfeits before the Cult could act, he was able to amass a shocking amount of capital."

"With that gold, Mitsugoshi will be able to survive the credit crisis."

"When that happens, the Cult will have lost the MCA. They'll be the sole losers."

"The Cult picked a fight with the wrong man. Master Shadow's understanding of money creation was what made his plan possible."

"He understood how dangerous a credit crisis could be, and he came up with a bold, efficient method of raising funds… A class act all around."

"We didn't want to reveal the link between Mitsugoshi and the Shadow Garden, so our hands were tied. That's why he had to work behind the scenes."

"And that explains why he had to hide his identity, too—to remove the link between him and us. Now nobody has any clue that there's a connection between the corporation and the counterfeits."

"He even went so far as to set up his factory somewhere we were familiar with, then told us where the vault was."

"In other words, he's telling us that all we have to do is pick up the gold."

Everyone breathes a deep sigh of relief.

"It's just like he told me. 'Once all this is over, you'll realize this was for the best.'"

“To fool your enemies, first fool your friends… That’s what he was doing all along.”

“A perfect plan formed on a foundation of subtlety and precise calculation… That’s Master Shadow for you. But what about Delta?”

Gamma’s voice is still a little worried, but Alpha’s eyes are filled with conviction.

“It’s Delta we’re talking about. I’m sure we don’t have anything to worry about.”

Suddenly, they hear a sound from outside.

Then the window slowly creeks open as Delta sheepishly lets herself in.

“—See?”

Gamma’s face flushes with joy. “Delta?! Oh, thank goodness…”

“Oh-woof… Alpha… I was on a confidential secret mission, see… So…”

Delta waits timidly for Alpha’s reaction.

“Don’t worry, I know. He had a job for you, right?”

Delta’s face immediately brightens. Her head bobs up and down as she nods.

“There was a black Juggler, and I…! Oh, it’s a confidential secret mission, so I can’t tell you…”

“Come on now, Delta, speak properly. Calling it a ‘confidential secret mission’ is redundant.”

“B-but that’s what Boss man said…!”

“Don’t be silly, of course he didn’t. Still, I’m so glad you’re okay…”

Delta seems to still have something she wants to say, but Alpha just strokes her head and squeezes her tight.

Gamma and Beta hug Delta as well, and they all wipe their tears away with a smile.

“He’s done so much for us already. We need to handle the rest ourselves. Let’s go collect the gold he prepared for us.”

“Got it!

“Sound like a plan!”

“Woof!”

And that night, the Shadow Garden makes their move.

I conduct a thorough sweep of the route to the Lawless City, then return to the underground base.

Yukime should be getting back soon.

When she does, it’ll probably be atop a cart laden with cash.

Afterward, we can grab our gold from the underground vault and bail. At that point, all there’ll be left to do is leisurely watch over the credit crisis from on high.

I mean, just picture it. John Smith, standing atop a high-rise hotel and gazing down at the capital with his arms crossed. *All according to plan. The crisis has begun…*, I'll murmur. Then I'll take a sip of some expensive wine, glance at the mountain of coins atop the table to my side, and grin meaningfully.

How cool is that?

I picture the scene as I walk through the facility's corridors.

It seems oddly quiet here.

All the assembly-line workers left, but there should still be some guards around.

Maybe they all dozed off because of how peaceful things are around here. You can hardly blame 'em. I worked my butt off making sure nobody could find us here, after all.

"Heh-heh-heh…"

I flash my pearly whites as I continue strolling. Finally, I stop in front of the vault.

"Huh…?"

Wait, why's the door open…?

It doesn't look like anyone unlocked it, either. It looks like it was forcibly broken down…

"No! There's no way…"

My patrols were perfect.

Not even a mouse could have made it here from the Lawless City.

My legs shake.

My hands tremble.

I break out into a cold sweat.

"Noooooooo, no-no-no-no-no-no-no. It's gonna be fine, it's gonna be fine…"

I peer inside the half-open vault.

It's…completely empty.

That massive pile of gold has vanished without a trace.

"You're kidding…"

My knees go weak, and I collapse to the ground where I'm standing.

"How could this *happen*…?"

All my gold…

"Ha… Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha. Surely, this is all just a bad dream…"

I reach up with my trembling hands and re-part my disheveled hair. Then I stand.

It's all gonna be fine.

Maybe Yukime had some reason why she had to move it.

Also, even if it was stolen, it'd take a while to make off with all that gold. Unless they're crazy prepared, they can't have gone far.

I step out of the vault, knees still rattling.

Then, sensing two presences approaching, I feign composure.

"—Mr. John!!"

Two sexy women call out my name.

It's Yukime's attendants, Natsu and Kana.

Trust me, guys, I already know something happened. Something definitely happened. It's pretty obvious—the goddamn vault's been cleaned out, after all.

"It's Yukime—she's disappeared! It must have been Gettan!"

"Wh…What…?"

Yukime…plus…Gettan…I see!

I laugh as everything becomes clear to me.

"Mr. John…?"

"Ah, so that's how it is…"

Natsu and Kana seem confused, so I open the vault door up and show them what isn't inside.

Their eyes go wide in shock.

"Th-that's—!"

"D-did he do this—?! But there's no way he could act that fast…"

"Do you two know where he is?"

"Y-yes…!"

"Then we're fine. I'll get 'em back."

I stride between the two of them, letting my magic leak out so the air vibrates.

"Wh-what's with this incredible magic?!"

"I-is this John Smith's true power?!"

I follow up by making my steel wires go *whoosh, whoosh, whoosh*. They leave elegant arcs of light in their wake as they slice through the air.

"Gettan… You pissed off the wrong guy…!"

Now then, time for revenge—

A little time passes—

Snow starts falling onto the capital right around when the sun makes its descent past the horizon. As the shadows gradually overtake the world's vermilion hue, the snowfall picks up in intensity.

A lone Spirit Fox stands still and gazes toward the capital's skyline as she stands atop a distant plain.

She exhales a cloudy breath, waiting for something with a melancholy look in her eyes.

A little while after the sun sinks fully from view, someone approaches her from behind.

"Was this all your doing, Yukime…?!"

The snow's begun piling up and dampening the night's sounds. As a result, the furious bellow carries well.

Yukime turns toward the eyeless, jet-black therianthrope.

“Gettan… You have no idea how long I’ve waited for this day.”

“So you and John Smith were working together…! Is this your idea of revenge?!”

Gettan’s face is contorted with rage, a stark contrast to Yukime’s calm demeanor.

“It’s over for you. Accept your fate…”

“No—not yet. If I take back the money you two stole, I can still fix this!!”

Gettan unsheathes his sword. It’s almost as long as he is tall.

“Gettan…” Yukime draws her fans. “Alas, I’m not the little girl you once knew anymore.”

The ground is piled high with pristine snow.

The pearly moon gleams overhead, accompanied by a host of stars.

With the beautiful black-and-white night as a backdrop, the blade and fans meet.

A burst of white snow flies into the air, accompanied by a shower of blood.

Vivid patches of red stain the blank snowy canvas.

“This… This can’t be…!”

Gettan drops to one knee. When he looks up at Yukime, his eyebrows rise.

At some point, Yukime’s body transformed.

Her nine silvery tails have grown even thicker and longer, and those eyes of hers that looked like pools of still water are now bloodred.

Even without his vision, Gettan can make out the dense magical energy she’s mantled in.

“This is the true form of us Spirit Foxes… You cannot defeat me.”

“So the legends are true… If you had that kind of power… If *I* had that kind of power, I wouldn’t have everything taken from me—!!”

Yukime responds to the raw hatred in Gettan’s expression with a sad smile.

“Gettan… What changed you so? Surely, you were not always like this.”

“Shut up!!”

“It’s over, Gettan.” Yukime presses her fans against his throat.

When he feels the cold steel, his expression freezes.

“Yukime—!”

She looks down at him, fans still held firmly in place.

Her face is tinged with nostalgia, as though she’s remembering events from days gone by.

Neither of them so much as twitches. It’s as if time itself is standing still.

The only movement is that of the snow slowly piling up.

Finally, Yukime lowers her fans. Her eyes and nine tails return to their original states.

“What are you playing at…?”

“My revenge is now complete.”

“Complete…you say?”

“I know not what it is that made you this way. But for all the sins you’ve committed, the fact that you once saved my village and my life remains unchanged… Sins do not erase good deeds, nor do good deeds erase sins. I choose to believe that the Gettan who saved me that day still resides somewhere inside you…”

Yukime turns and begins walking away across the snowy plain.

“Good-bye, Gettan…”

He watches her leave with his closed eyes and glares at her.

“I don’t need…your *pity*…”

However, his resentment doesn’t reach her.

He pops a red pill into his mouth. His wounds rapidly heal, and then—

“…Ah—”

A flower of blood blooms atop the snow.

“How much of a mockery do you plan to make of me…?”

“Get…tan…”

Run through by his blade, Yukime crumples to the cold ground.

As her consciousness starts to fade, tears roll down her cheeks.

“Mr.…John…forgive me…”

As she weeps, a fierce gust of wind blows, kicking up the lightly powdered snow. A dark figure appears.

“—?! Who’s there?!”

A man appears out of the darkness of night and alabaster flurry.

The powdered snow dances around him as his steel wires slice through the air.

“—I believe you’ve taken something very important from me.”

The man striding forward is clad in a black suit, his face concealed beneath a mask—it’s John Smith.

“Mr. John…”

Yukime calls out his name, although it causes her pain to do so. For some reason, seeing John like this feels deeply nostalgic.

“So it’s John Smith. You claim that I stole from you…but you took from me first!”

Gettan’s closed eyes glare at John Smith.

“I’m only here to take back what you stole,” replies John Smith. “Nothing more.”

“What I took? Heh, good luck with that.”

“I won’t need luck.”

“You insolent little… You know, I have something I need to take back, too. A little something that *you two* stole from *me*!”

Gettan readies his longsword.

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s so typical of a lowlife to play dumb…” Gettan clicks his tongue. “This is a waste of my breath.”

“And of my time.”

John Smith deploys his wires.

The two of them glare at each other, their gazes dripping with hatred, and then—

“GETTAN—”

“JOHN SMIIIIIIIIITH—!!”

—the violent clash begins.

Gettan’s longsword arcs toward him. However, his enemy doesn’t so much as attempt to dodge.

The blade plows toward his neck, then comes to an abrupt stop in midair.

“Eh—what?!”

Surprised by his sword’s sudden halt, Gettan pulls it back.

John Smith calmly watches him, then murmurs, “You did something just now…”

Gettan clicks his tongue in annoyance. “You think you’re so clever… Stopping my sword by running magic through those thin strings of yours.”

“…Oh?”

“There are things I’ve lost, but there are things I’ve gained in their place, as well. When I lost my ability to see, I quickly gained the ability to use magic to sense the space around me.”

Gettan’s magic is spread out over the entire area.

“That means I can see them! I can see each and every one of your flimsy little threads!! True, I was surprised at how skillfully you manipulated them. But in the end—”

Gettan’s lips curl into a wicked grin.

“—you picked a bad man to make an enemy of, John Smith!!”

He slashes at John Smith again. John Smith successfully deals with the blade by dodging backward, but his wires can’t so much as graze Gettan.

“It’s no use!! I told you, I can see everything!!”

John Smith falls back. Gettan presses forward.

Yukime watches the fierce battle through her tears. She sees John Smith, fighting as hard as he can…

In all the time she's known him, she's never seen him so visibly enraged.

Their relationship hasn't been a long one. However, she's well aware he isn't the type to wear his emotions on his sleeve.

Right now, though, he's furious—furious from the bottom of his heart.

Furious at Gettan, the man who stole her away and ran her through.

"Mr. John…"

He looks like he's on the back foot, but Yukime knows this isn't the full extent of his strength.

Then—

John Smith fires off a question. "Is that all you've got…?"

"Rrr…" Gettan pants as he glares at John Smith.

He's been on the offensive this whole time, yet his blade hasn't reached John Smith even once.

To the contrary, Gettan's body is the one covered in countless tiny cuts.

He can see all the wires, true.

However, it's precisely his ability to see them that keeps him from advancing into their net.

John Smith's wires are spread out like a spiderweb. One step in, and escape becomes impossible.

Gettan senses its immaculate arrangement. It's perfectly designed to predict, trap, and capture its prey.

Each time he tries to push his limits even a little, he immediately finds himself riddled with cuts.

If he doesn't go forward, he can never slice his foe. But if he does—only death awaits.

Before he noticed, all Gettan became able to do was futilely swing a sword that could never reach its mark.

John Smith calmly steps toward him. At some point, he used his steel wires to cut off Gettan's escape routes.

"I think you have something you want to tell me. Say it…"

"Ah—"

When Gettan hears the order, he looks toward Yukime for the briefest of moments. However, he quickly shakes his head.

"I have *nothing* to say to you!!"

"Is that so—"

The next moment, blood bursts from Gettan's chest. The steel wires surrounding him just sliced at his guts.

Even as his face contorts in pain, however, he continues glaring at John Smith.

"I needed power! I sacrificed everything for it!! And I'm not about to back down now!!"

He pulls a heap of red pills from his pocket and swallows them all down. It's obviously far more than the recommended dose.

"I won't let myself be stolen from again… So if it's to keep what's mine…"

Gettan glances at Yukime for the second time. It's almost as though he can truly see.

Then his body rapidly darkens. His muscles expand and contort grotesquely.

Waves of magic burst from his body and blast away the falling snow.

"…then my life is a small price to pay."

Gettan opens his crushed eyelids.

The eyes beneath them are bloodred orbs.

Crimson tears stream down his cheeks.

His movements are leagues faster than they were before. The moment the snow at his feet flies up, he's already standing before John Smith.

"HRAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!!"

He brings his blade down with a roar.

John Smith's fingers twitch, and the steel wire cuts through the air.

"—Oh?"

When the longsword and steel wires meet, John Smith is the one forced to retreat.

A number of severed threads flop down from his fingers.

Gettan doesn't stop there. His movements are animalistic as he gives pursuit.

Once again, his longsword slices through John Smith's wires.

He swings his sword. John Smith's wires dance.

The exchange goes on for a little while, but eventually, John Smith runs out of wires.

"GRAAAAAH!!"

A maniacal grin spreads across Gettan's face as he presses toward his disarmed foe.

However, John Smith just stands motionless and sighs.

"At the end of the day, it's just steel…," he murmurs uninterestedly as he fixes his gaze on Gettan's onrushing form.

Then…they meet.

John Smith evades Gettan's ferocious blow by taking a step forward and bending one knee. The longsword grazes his cheek, taking a tuft of black hair with it.

The dodge used only the bare minimum movement required.

The step was short and quick.

As such, he was able to perform them in one ideal, fluid motion.

In other words…it's an act of martial perfection.

"What?!"

As Gettan's eyes go wide with shock, John Smith's elbow collides with his jaw.

“Gluh—” He staggers backward. His enemy presses the attack.

A fist plows into Gettan’s gut, and when he lurches forward, he receives a knee strike to the torso.

And John Smith doesn’t let up there.

Nothing about his fists, elbows, or knees is special, yet they sink into Gettan’s body all the same. Gettan’s engorged flesh is getting tossed around like a toy.

A man’s body is his final, most reliable weapon…and John Smith is the embodiment of that ideal.

Gettan frantically tries to retreat and put some distance between himself and the whirlwind of blows.

Thanks to the pills, his body heals as soon as it takes damage. The storm won’t last forever, so all he has to do is weather it and get to safety, and—

John Smith, however, doesn’t stop.

With each step, he cuts off Gettan’s escape routes, and with each blow, he saps power from Gettan’s legs.

As he rains down the flurry of blows, he calculates and predicts Gettan’s every move. That’s how he continues his one-sided beatdown.

By keeping Gettan at point-blank range, he’ll always be in John Smith’s reach. No matter how his prey moves, he never lets it escape.

The dispassionate, almost mechanical beatdown continues.

“Gack… Gah-hah… Grah… Urk…”

Gettan’s bones break, his fangs snap, and his organs burst. They immediately regenerate.

The torture seems never-ending. The sprays of blood paint a macabre carpet atop the fallen snow.

Eventually, John Smith’s blows pick up in strength. They pick up in speed, too.

“You have something to tell me. Say it.”

“Gah… Hur-guh…”

John Smith’s words are accompanied by more blows.

Finally, Gettan reaches his limit.

The regeneration stops.

Seeing that, John Smith backs up half a step—then swings his right leg with all his might.

His foot slams into the side of Gettan’s skull, and the therianthrope collapses violently onto the snow.

As Gettan tries to get up, John Smith stamps down on his chest.

He glares up at the man. Gettan’s eyes throb, as though trying to remind him of the past.

“Gah…”

John Smith smashes his fist into his opponent’s face.

“—Say it.”

He punches him again.

“—Tell me what I want to hear.”

“John Smith. I see… You’re the one…from back then…”

Gettan looks up at John Smith, all sorts of emotions running across his face: rage, hatred, envy, regret…

“If I had power like yours, maybe things would have been different…”

The mixed feelings in his voice afford it a certain weight.

“I tried to flee from my own weakness, and look where that’s gotten me… All I really wanted to protect was…” Gettan smiles. “But I feel…I can entrust it to you…”

Gettan’s voice is weak now. His finger trembles as he points in Yukime’s direction.

“I trust you…with Yu…”

“…Understood.” John Smith clasps Gettan’s trembling hand in his. “You can leave it all to me.”

And then Gettan breathes his last.

Yukime buries her face in John Smith’s chest. Her tears sink into his suit. “I finally remembered… You’re the one who…”

John Smith runs magic through his hands, then strokes Yukime’s wound.

“So warm… Like it was all the way back then…”

Thump. Yukime’s heart pounds.

Ever since that day, that day when everything was taken from her, she’s had to live alone with a frozen heart.

No matter what happened, no matter who embraced her, she’d vowed to accept it with a smile.

The ice was a wall she built to protect herself, one that she knew would never thaw.

Yet now, it was melting.

“…Thank you,” Yukime says.

John Smith cocks his head to the side.

Then he lets out a quiet murmur. “I think he said it was buried under a yew tree over there or something, right…?”

“I’ve got one last job I need to do.”

John Smith begins digging a hole, and Yukime returns to the capital on her own. He must be digging Gettan a grave. Perhaps that’s what Gettan had been searching for—somewhere to die.

That’s the impression his final look had given Yukime, in any case. He seemed peaceful, almost nostalgic.

After spending a night resting in the capital, Yukime picks up the gold coins she just traded for and heads back to their hideout.

John Smith healed all her wounds. Even the ugly scars across her back have vanished without a trace.

Once she reaches the base, she heads down to the vault with her gold in tow. However, what she sees within comes as a shock.

"What in the…?"

All of its contents are gone.

As she cocks her head to the side in surprise, a figure clad in black appears behind her.

"I see. You're Yukime, president of the Snow Fox Corporation…"

"—?!"

Yukime whirls around to find a platinum-blond elf beauty standing there.

"Who are you?" Yukime asks as she gets ready to draw her fans at a moment's notice.

"My name is Alpha. I'm with the Shadow Garden. Given the reception you're giving me, I assume he hasn't told you anything."

"Alpha…?"

Yukime's well aware that John Smith—aka Shadow—is the Shadow Garden's leader.

However, he never mentioned anything about the organization to her. It's strange, now that she thinks about it.

"I suppose you must have been his collaborator… As well as the woman the MCA's Gettan was fixated on…"

"What are you trying to say?"

"I have a letter for you. I'm afraid the seal is broken, but I thought it would only be proper to give it to you anyway."

Alpha hands her a timeworn sheet of paper.

"The MCA will fall soon, and there were some things we wanted to collect from them before that happened. We found this in Gettan's room. It's a letter…no, a will. And it's addressed to you."

"Gettan's will…"

Yukime takes it and starts reading.

The first thing that takes her by surprise is how messy the writing is. He must have refused to entrust it to anyone else, writing it himself even through his blindness. Yukime can sense definite fragments of the warmth of his handwriting in that messy scrawl.

Gettan starts the letter with an apology to Yukime and the people of her village, then goes on to curse his own weakness.

Finally, he reveals an alarming truth.

"The Cult of Diablos…"

It's the true identity of the organization that set him along his path.

"We of the Shadow Garden are fighting to take down the Cult of Diablos. And of course, *he's* no different…"

"Mr. John, too…"

"Also, Mitsugoshi is a Shadow Garden front."

"—?! Heavens! What a shock!"

"This entire incident's played out exactly how he wanted it to from the very beginning. Unfortunately, that does mean we had to take all the gold."

“Ah, and now Mitsugoshi will be able to ride out the credit crisis.”

“We’ll also be able to snatch up the MCA’s assets. Our position will be nigh unassailable.”

“And Mr. John…no, Mr. Shadow saw it all coming.”

“If you want to curse him as a traitor, you’re well within your rights to do so. I have no doubt he’s prepared to accept that judgment.”

Yukime shakes her head. “I have no intentions of doing such a thing. Mr. Shadow has saved me now twice over.”

“…Very well.” Alpha nods. “We’re prepared to accept you into our ranks. Unless you have objections, we would have you keep continue managing Snow Fox so you could act as our liaison to the Lawless City.”

“Ah. Very wise. You want Mitsugoshi to act as the public face, and for Snow Fox to handle the dirty work… A clever arrangement.”

Yukime and Alpha have identical smiles on their faces.

It’s clear they each hold the other in strong admiration.

“We’re glad to have you on board.”

“The pleasure is all mine.”

After they finish shaking hands, Yukime lets out a quiet murmur. “Although it brings me no joy to discover just how many important people he has in his life…”

She and Alpha leave the base together, discussing their future plans.

The MCA’s collapse is swift.

Knowing they won’t have enough reserves to meet people’s demand to trade in their paper bills, many merchants close up shop and try to flee in the night. Eventually, the Knight Order has to be called in to force them to open their coffers, but the amount of money within is nowhere remotely close to the amount of paper bills in circulation.

Eventually, all the merchants are rounded up. Their punishment will no doubt be harsh.

When the masses watch the MCA collapse, their gaze immediately turns to Mitsugoshi.

The morning after the MCA goes bankrupt, they all swarm Mitsugoshi Bank’s capital branch office.

There are enough of them to pack the main street completely full.

The moment the bank opens, they all rush in, paper bills in hand. What they find inside, however, astonishes them.

Mitsugoshi Bank is using a large hall as their vault, and there’s a dazzling mountain of gold piled up within.

The tellers all greet the throng with calm, composed smiles.

When the people in the crowd see Mitsugoshi Bank fulfill exchange request after exchange request after exchange request, one of them turns to leave, then another.

By the time noon rolls around, the line's dwindle to almost nothing.

Only about 30 percent of the people who lined up at the beginning of the day actually decide to trade in their bills.

Seeing Mitsugoshi Bank's reaction sets the people at ease.

The mountain of gold, the tellers' polite smiles, and the reputation that Mitsugoshi Group's built up over time certainly doesn't hurt, either. As further proof of that, it takes no time at all before customers looking for paper money loans appear once more.

Mitsugoshi Bank—as well as Mitsugoshi, Ltd., as a whole—is able to use the MCA's collapse to elevate their position and further increase their trust with the consumers.

At this point, they're so powerful, not even the government can stand up to them.

If Mitsugoshi were to leave, the kingdom's economy will be reduced to shambles.

This whole incident has caused the nation's leadership to view money creation with alarm. However, the fact does remain that the credit crisis Mitsugoshi and the others orchestrated brought them an unprecedented wave of prosperity.

As a result, they decide to hold a meeting with representatives from Mitsugoshi Group and Mitsugoshi Bank and eventually come to a set of agreements regarding credit creation.

With that, the series of tumultuous events finally comes to a close.

I dig through the earth with my slime shovel.

I've been digging this whole time.

So why is it, then? Why haven't I found anything?

And why haven't I heard anything from Yukime?

She was supposed to go grab the coins she stashed in the capital while I dug up the buried gold, and afterward, we could all live happily ever after. That was the plan, at least.

Except the gold isn't showing up, and Yukime's gone dark.

Also, now that I think about it, Mitsugoshi Bank survived somehow.

Why?

What does it all mean?

The only thing I know is that my plan is in ruins.

"Boss man, we're not finding anything," says Delta as she scrapes through the dirt with her bare hands.

"It's here… It's somewhere around here, it should be."

I keep digging. If all I needed to do was hollow out the ground, I could just blow it all up, but that'd blow up the gold, too.

In other words, hard labor is my only option.

Delta followed me here by tracking my scent, so I'm having her help me, too.

"Boss man, is this a confidential secret mission, too?"

"Yup, so you have to make sure you don't tell Alpha about it."

"Got it!"

"See, what we have here is a man's dying message."

"Dine-in message?"

"It's when someone tells you the truth right before they die. This guy and I hated each other, so we fought to the death, but in the end, we came to a mutual understanding. And the word he left me with on his deathbed was 'yew.' And he pointed here. In other words, he was telling me that he buried something important under the yew trees here."

"Wow!"

"It's elementary, my dear."

"Elementary!" Delta wags her tail, her eyes glittering. "When we're done digging, will you do whatever I say?"

"Huh?"

"Remember, you promised!"

"Huuuh?"

"You promised, Boss man!!"

"Huuuuuh?"

"Oh-woof…" Delta stares at me with upturned eyes.

"Sorry, sorry, yeah, I remember saying that."

"You did!"

"But I never said I'd do *anything*—"

"You said you'd do anything!"

"No, I definitely specified I'd only do stuff within reason."

"You said you'd do anything!!"

Crap. Delta's got herself totally convinced that's what I actually said.

"Delta, that's not what I said. Lying is bad, and if I had a voice recorder, your lie would totally get exposed."

"Boy's recorder?"

"It's a type of Shadow Weaponry. When you turn it on, it destroys the world."

"R-really?!"

"That's why you shouldn't lie. You don't want the world getting destroyed, do you?"

"Oh-woof… I don't want the world destroyed… B-but, Boss man, you promised…"

Delta looks at me sadly. Hell, she's on the verge of tears.

“All right, all right, let’s settle on a compromise. I’ll do what you ask within reason. But remember, Delta, there are things even I won’t do. I’m not Santa, after all.”

“Santa?” Delta tilts her head to the side.

“Santa Claus… The monstrous devil in crimson who rules over the world from the shadows…”

“A devil?!”

“His outfit is crimson, drenched in blood. He destroys people’s dreams, fills them with despair, and paints his suit with their sinew…”

“That’s awful!”

“That’s right. He’s an awful guy. Once, long ago, I, too, suffered at his hand.”

“He even got you, Boss man?!”

“I had a dream that I wanted fulfilled no matter the cost, but he let me down at every turn.”

“A dream?”

“I wanted to become an eminence in sha—no, I’d better not say. I swore to myself that I’d never put the one thing that truly matters into words. Anyways, ever since I was a kid, he betrayed me year after year, each time leaving another scar on my heart. Basically, Delta, what I’m trying to say is that I’m not Santa, so there are some wishes I won’t grant.”

For some reason, Delta stares straight at my face and blinks a few times. Then she cocks her head.

“But Santa doesn’t grant all wishes, either, right? You said he betrayed your dream!”

True.

“Huh,” I say.

“Huh!”

“You’re right. That doesn’t add up.”

“It doesn’t add up!”

The two of us both cock our heads.

“Eh, whatever. The point is, I’m willing to compromise, but there’s some stuff I won’t do.”

“Oh-woof…”

“Now, I’m gonna head off on a journey, so why don’t you have a good long think about what you want to ask me for.”

“A journey?!”

“Yeah, a journey of self-discovery…”

Alpha and the others are probably livid, so it’d be better if I gave them some time to cool off. Emotions dwindle as the hours and days wear on. They say time heals all. Besides, it’s winter break at the academy anyway.

All I gotta do is show up nonchalantly around Alpha and the others after break is over. I purposefully won’t apologize. I’ll just go on like normal, pretending like nothing happened.

The thing is, I've discovered an unbeatable Hidden Technique that lets you emerge victorious from any interpersonal conflict.

The trick is…you wear them out.

All you have to do is make them think, Ugh, there's no point trying to reason with this guy.

Nobody complains when babies do stuff, after all. In other words, that's the level I have to reduce myself to.

If I'm not careful, this Hidden Technique can become a double-edged sword.

The thing is, you win every argument, but in a way, you also lose them…

"Oh, and we can stop digging now. Thanks for all the help."

My plan was completely ruined. And Mitsugoshi ended up surviving anyway, so even if I find the gold, it's not like it'll do me much good.

"Now then, I'm off on my journey! Later."

"Wait, Boss man! Something just came out of the—!"

I hear Delta shouting at me from behind, but I dash off at full speed so she can't successfully complete her "request."

Now that I think about it, the first time Santa betrayed me was on a snowy night just like this one.

The Eminence in Shadow
Volume 3

Appendix

Appendix

Delta

“I’m good at hunting.”

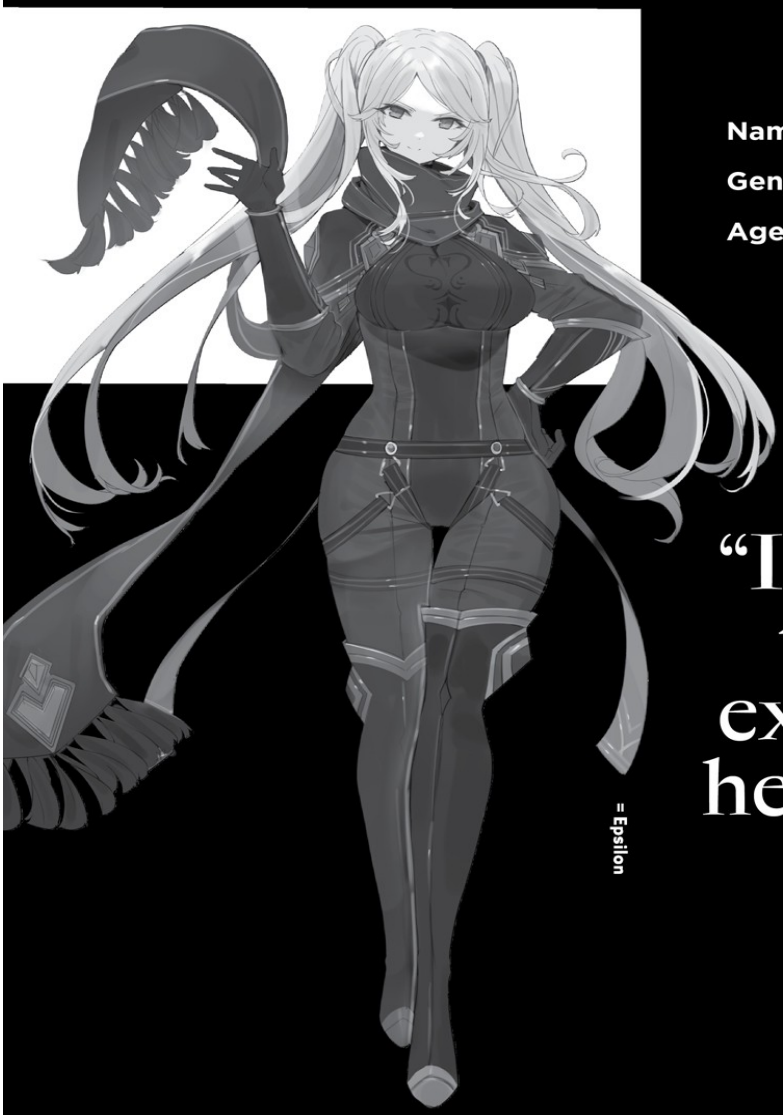
Name: Delta

Gender: Female

Age: 15

A canine therianthrope and the fourth member of the Seven Shadows. Shadow saved her after she contracted the “possession” and was driven out of her pack. Her tremendous aptitude for battle has earned her the nickname Suicide Weapon Delta, and in terms of raw combat power, she’s considered the strongest of the Seven Shadows. Her senses are sharp, and she excels at erasing her presence when she hunts. Unfortunately, she’s a bit dumb, so she falls for traps easily.

Epsilon



= Epsilon

Name: Epsilon

Gender: Female

Age: 17

“I refuse to be exposed heeeere!”

A petite elf and the fifth member of the Seven Shadows. She’s so good at controlling magic that she’s known as Epsilon the Precise. However, the reason she mastered that skill is to perfectly replicate how a “certain something” jiggles. By padding her chest, constricting her waist, and lengthening her legs with elevator boots, she’s been able to use her slime bodysuit to grant herself the perfect figure.

Claire Kagenou

= Claire Kagenou

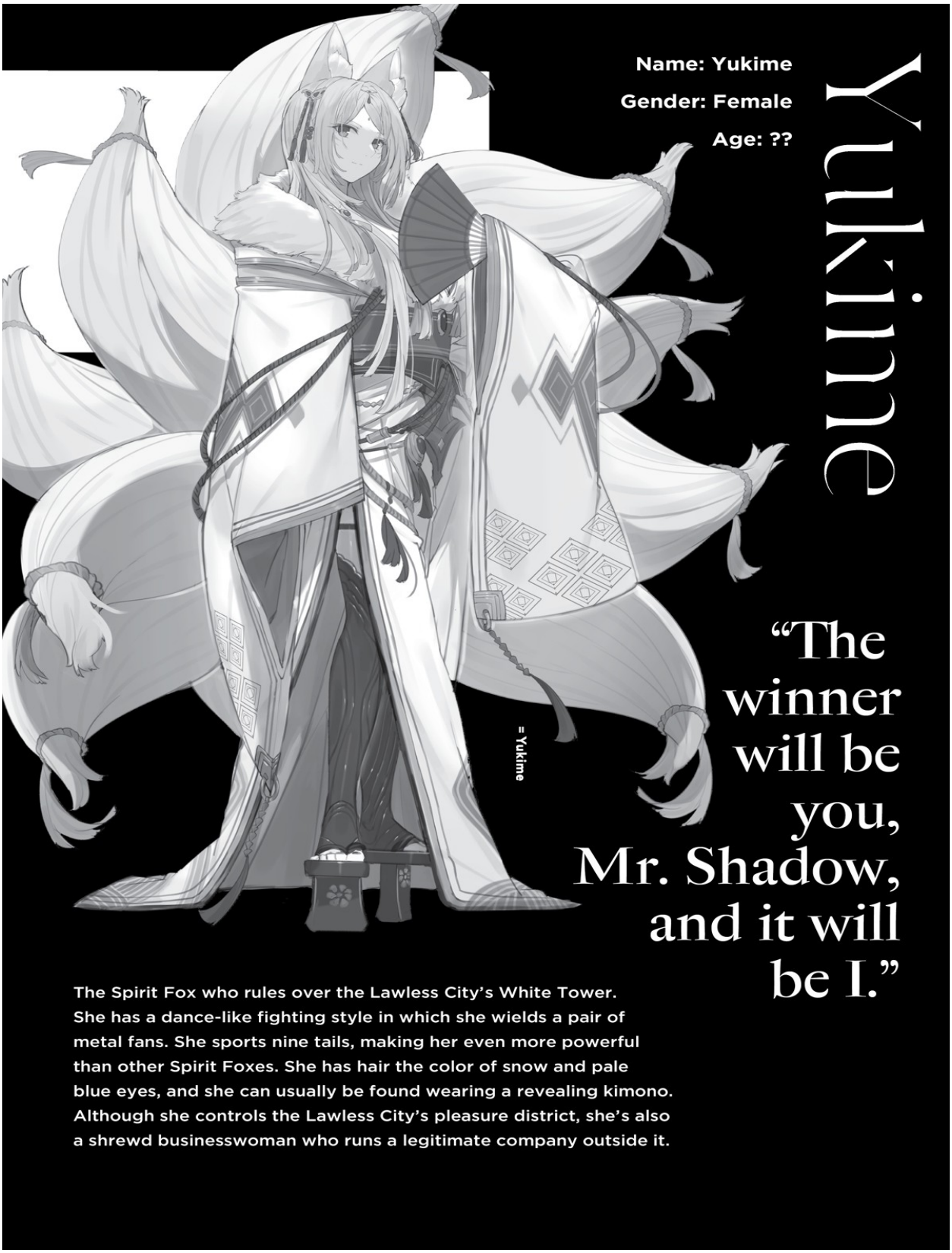
"Don't you dare touch a hair on Cid's head."

Name: Claire Kagenou

Gender: Female

Age: 17

Cid's older sister, the golden child of the Kagenous. She contracted the "possession" as a child, which Cid secretly cured. The Knight Order has tried to recruit her on account of her superb sword skills, but she doesn't want to be separated from her brother out of concern for his well-being. Thanks to a certain incident, she's come to believe she has special powers.



Yukime

Name: Yukime

Gender: Female

Age: ??

= Yukime

“The winner will be you, Mr. Shadow, and it will be I.”

The Spirit Fox who rules over the Lawless City’s White Tower. She has a dance-like fighting style in which she wields a pair of metal fans. She sports nine tails, making her even more powerful than other Spirit Foxes. She has hair the color of snow and pale blue eyes, and she can usually be found wearing a revealing kimono. Although she controls the Lawless City’s pleasure district, she’s also a shrewd businesswoman who runs a legitimate company outside it.

The Chronicles of Master Shadow

Complete Version: Volume III

By Beta

The Red Moon rose in the night sky. At first, the difference was imperceptible. It was only a little redder than usual. That's why nobody realized that it was an omen of the Blood Queen's imminent resurrection—nobody except Master Shadow, that is.

The Blood Queen is a legendary Progenitor Vampire who, a thousand years ago, destroyed an entire country in the span of a single night. If Master Shadow hadn't noticed the Red Moon, who knows the damage that would have been caused? It's scary just thinking about it. But upon realizing that a legendary vampire with the power to destroy the world was reviving, what did Master Shadow do? Why, he decided to fight her on his own! I'll never forget how radiantly confident his expression was and how gallant a figure he struck when he said, "The moon is just a little redder than usual, nothing more. I can handle this myself with ease."

With that, Master Shadow charged into the Lawless City, where the Blood Queen slept, all on his own!

Over in the Lawless City, the Blood Queen's henchmen were working to bring about their queen's resurrection. The ghouls went on a Red Moon–empowered rampage and attacked the city's people. The alleyways ran wet with blood, the air was filled with screams, and the Lawless City descended into—dare I say it—lawlessness! As all this went on, Master Shadow made his move at last. He sliced the rampaging ghouls, rescuing the terrified townspeople as he went! He even went so far as to save the incompetent members of the Dark Knight Association who were trying to hunt him down. What a truly magnanimous man he is! After Master Shadow saved them, they surely must have realized how small-minded they'd been and chosen to devote the rest of their lives to worshipping him.

While Master Shadow was saving the petty lowlifes, the Blood Queen finished her resurrection! And who was it that stood against her? Why, the ravishing beauty with silver hair and an adorable little mole, Beta, of course! Realizing Master Shadow wasn't there yet, she decided to buy time for him alongside her attendants! Her attendants got beaten black-and-blue, but Beta stood up to the Blood Queen and sacrificed her body to protect Master Shadow's sister. It goes without saying the world shed tears of gratitude for her noble sacrifice, and Master Shadow's heart must have been deeply moved, too. As proof of that, he immediately moved to cover Beta when he showed up, even though doing so dulled his movements dramatically!

Master Shadow was forced into peril to protect his beloved Beta—but when things looked their darkest, she cried out!!

"I'll be fine… So go save the rest of the world!"

Hearing her laudable bravery got Master Shadow all fired up!! Not only did the power of love let him beat the Blood Queen in a

flash, he even managed to bring her back to her senses! Afterward, the Blood Queen was so grateful to him that she promised to assist the Shadow Garden if they ever needed her help. As for Master Shadow, now that he'd saved both the world and his true love, he vanished once more into the night—!

Now, it's easy to get caught up in Master Shadow's incredible strength, but his intellect is perhaps even more astonishing. His Shadow Wisdom allowed Mitsugoshi to grow rapidly, eventually becoming the largest company in the entire Midgar region. However, all the old merchants weren't going to take that lying down. Jealous of Mitsugoshi's rapid expansion, they all banded together and formed the Major Corporate Alliance! They were too late, though. Thanks to the power of Shadow Wisdom, Mitsugoshi was far more powerful than the MCA had anticipated.

In order to combat Mitsugoshi Bank's paper money, the MCA developed their own currency. But because they'd gotten a late start, they had difficulties getting people to use it. Those fools at the MCA had picked a losing fight, and it was only a matter of time before they went under. But we wouldn't learn who the *true* fools were until after everything was all said and done.

It was around the end of fall when counterfeits of the MCA bills started showing up. Their bills were shoddy, so duplicating them would have been child's play. However, there was no way we could have known that Master Shadow had seen through everything and that the counterfeits were part of his master plan. Because of money creation, counterfeits posed a dangerous threat. Once their presence became known, a credit crisis would occur when the masses stopped trusting paper currency. Then, once people stopped trusting the MCA's bills, they would immediately stop trusting Mitsugoshi's bills in turn. When we realized that, we immediately opened an investigation into where the counterfeits were coming from so we could pin down our enemy. It was a man named John Smith, a master wire-user.

We sent Delta after him, but he turned the tables on her and struck her down. Hearing about that came as an utter shock at the time, but thinking back on it now, it makes complete sense. Afterward, Alpha pursued John Smith to avenge Delta's death. When she did, however, we were confronted with yet another shocking truth: John Smith was none other than Master Shadow in disguise!

Alpha returned, disheartened, then collapsed from the shock. And who could blame her? After all, she'd just discovered that the man responsible for producing the counterfeits and trying to cause the credit crisis was Master Shadow. There was nothing we could do. If Master Shadow wanted Mitsugoshi destroyed, it was our

job to stand by and let it happen. That didn't stop us from being stricken with grief, though.

That brings us to the day before the crisis. After deciphering the code Master Shadow entrusted to us, we discovered that the truth was something none of us had considered!

To our alarm, it turned out that the MCA was being controlled by the Cult of Diablos. They'd made their bills shoddy on purpose so they could produce counterfeits and cause a credit crisis. By figuring out their plan, getting the drop on them, and cashing in his own counterfeits to amass a huge amount of gold, Master Shadow gave Mitsugoshi the funds they needed to ride the crisis out. Upon learning the truth, we wept tears of joy and felt ashamed of our own foolishness. It was a magnificent, almost *divine* plan that only Master Shadow could have come up with! As he was beating up the Cult member who'd been manipulating the MCA, we went and used the gold he'd prepared for us to ride out the credit crisis and gain even more influence!

That's all for Master Shadow's grand endeavors!

In the next installment of *The Chronicles of Master Shadow*, though, we'll see fierce battles unfold in the Oriana Kingdom!! The Cult must be operating behind the scenes with one of their little schemes! We'll learn why Master Shadow has appeared before Princess Rose! And what dark secret does the Oriana Kingdom hold?! Also, the Knights of Rounds will finally make their move!!

Stay tuned for next time!!

Afterword

Thank you all for reading Volume 3 of *The Eminence in Shadow*.

I have two announcements I'd like to make to you all.

First of all, the first volume of Anri Sakano's manga adaptation of *The Eminence in Shadow* is now available for purchase!

It has a short story I wrote about Shadow Garden's early days bundled with it, so I hope you'll all go check it out.

Next, I want to talk a little about where *The Eminence in Shadow* is going from here.

As some of you may already be aware, this series is a novelization of a serial I wrote on a website called *Shousetsuka ni Narou*.

The books have had some revisions, but the contents as a whole have been largely the same as the web version, which is a fact I'd like to apologize for.

As a result, I took it upon myself to change the plot a little for Volume 3 to make it more interesting for all of you. The main plot points are still the same, but I changed some of the details around and touched up some sections to try and make the novelization a little different from the web version.

For Volume 4, I've decided to write an all-new original story!

It's going to be completely different from the web version, so even people who've already read it online will be able to enjoy it as well. It might take me a little while, but I'm going to write the best, most interesting story yet!

I'm going to try my hardest to make Volume 4 as awesome as possible for all my amazing readers, so I hope you'll tune in next time to *The Eminence in Shadow*!

I'm getting to the end here, so I'd like to say some words of gratitude.

I'd like to thank my editor for helping me through the entire publishing process. I'd like to thank Touzai for the best illustrations I could ever hope for. I'd like to express my appreciation for Araki at BALCOLONY. for the incredible designs that color this book. Lastly, I'd like to thank my readers for their support. Thank you again from the bottom of my heart.

Let's meet again in Volume 4!

Daisuke Aizawa

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